THE RETURN OF BLACKSHIRT

BRUCE GRAEME

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R. P. White

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THE RETURN OF BLACKSHIRT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

BLACKSHIRT
LA BELLE LAURINE
THE TRAIL OF THE WHITE KNIGHT
PASSION, MURDER AND MYSTERY

THE RETURN OF BLACKSHIRT

BY

BRUCE GRAEME

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THE
RETURN OF BLACKSHIRT

EPISODE I — BLACKSHIRT RETURNS

INSIDE the Calais Harbour Station the *rapide* waited for the connecting packet which was slowly nosing its way to the quayside. The *Maid of Kent* was unusually crowded; its decks were thronged with cosmopolitan groups of passengers, many of whom gazed with intense interest at the view which stretched away before them.

Frenchmen, eyes afire with a patriotic gleam at the sight once again of their native land, rubbed shoulders with timid English misses, already trembling with nervousness that their school-learned French would fail to make itself understood. Italians, impatiently anxious to get forward to their country, stood side by side with Hungarians and Austrians *en route* to Budapest and Vienna via Paris. To all of them the quay presented another milestone on their separate journeys.

Everywhere smiling faces were to be seen, from all directions snatches of happy camaraderie were to be heard. The packet was a boatload of sunny souls.

Happiest of them all, even among so many, stood a man and a woman. If for a moment their eyes strayed elsewhere with a fleeting interest it was only to veer rapidly back to each other. Wrapped up in themselves, not even a glimpse of the quaint old town of Calais in the distance could distract their attention, though, to the woman, it was already a place of memories, for Bobbie had spent many a pleasant holiday upon the

Continent. Still, what mattered the past? She dreamed now only of the future, with its prospect of glorious, heavenly days ahead; her head was filled only with visions which pivoted around her husband, the man beside her.

The sailors at the stern and the bow threw out their lines; the crowd surged amidship where the gangways would fall, each person anxious to be the first to get through the Customs, but Bobbie and Verrell were content to wait. Their seats were booked on the *rapide;* there was no need for haste.

Bobbie pinched her husband's arm, and he looked at her inquiringly.

"Richard dear, what is the time?"

He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Ten minutes past seven. We are five minutes late."

Bobbie looked around. No one was paying the slightest attention to them. She slipped her tiny hand through his arm.

"Richard dear, do you realize that we have been married for over seven hours? Fancy, seven whole hours! Doesn't time go quickly?"

He smiled. "I only hope the next four weeks won't pass so rapidly in comparison. Why, it seems but an hour ago when I was being rushed off in a taxi to the church."

"It has been a wonderful day," she breathed. "Oh, Richard darling, I feel so terribly happy that I can scarcely believe that everything is real. It isn't a dream, is it?"

"You should worry!" he taunted. The words sprung to his lips without previous contemplation, yet to both of them they were reminiscent. They were a memory of that time when Richard Verrell was Blackshirt, and she, his unknown mentor, his "Lady of the Phone."

Those were the times when he pursued his criminal

career, sometimes urged on, but usually checked by one who, in the full, rich accent of the United States, spoke to him only over the telephone; those were the days, about a year ago, when he fell in love with her voice.

In the distance, as a thing apart, her voice was liquid music, charming in its rhythm, its sweet cadence; but associated with, allied to her, it ceased to be outstanding, for it was but merely part of the whole, just one more characteristic which helped to make Bobbie all she was, not only to Verrell's infatuated and prejudiced views, but also to other unsuccessful suitors who had not yet ceased to bemoan the fact that Bobbie had already made her final choice.

Similar thoughts must have been passing through Bobbie's mind. "Richard dear, you are happy, aren't you, or do you regret giving up your adventures and the attendant thrills?"

He did not reply immediately, but when he did so there was a subtle note of regret in his voice.

"Sometimes I do, dear one. Now and again I feel that I would give anything for just one adventure. When I wake up in the night and see it so dark it tempts me, reminds me of other similar nights in bygone years."

"But—but you do not wish to give way to such thoughts?" She was not really anxious; her reliance in him was far too sure to be shaken by even his own apparent weakness, yet she urged him to continue, just for the delight it gave her to listen.

"Of course not!" His denial was emphatic, astoundingly confident.

"And you are happy?"

"Happy!" The word reverberated in its intensity. "So happy, darling, that sometimes it occurs to me that we love each other too much, and then I wonder how long Fate will permit us to live in such an Elysium.

Sometimes I feel so full of ecstatic rapture that I become afraid."

"You big, stupid husband of mine," she scolded, "you must not ponder over such things. Why should you feel afraid, and of what?"

He answered the second question first. "Of losing you, dear. You mean so much to me that—that—supposing I lost you!" There was a vibrant note in his voice. Bobbie sensed that he could almost feel the pain which would be his if ever such an event should come to pass.

"But why should anything happen?" she asked for the second time.

"Because of the law of average, because none of us can be so deliriously happy that the time will not arrive when the bombshell will fall, when day will become night, unhappiness, suffering, grief, or sorrow will reign instead."

"But, Richard darling, of course night succeeds day, but when the night is over dawn breaks and the sun holds sway again."

"Exactly! That's the law. This is our daytime. How soon will the night come?"

"No, no! I do not believe in that theory. Beside, this is our dawn. Has not all your life been your night? Isn't your day to come?"

He looked down at her suddenly, his eyes twinkling. "I cannot say my life has been unhappy for the last seven or eight years. To the contrary, I have been so content, so smug, that I do not know how I could possibly have remained so with you just around the corner. Bobbie, Bobbie, how I love you! These few months have more than made up for all my lost years. This cannot be dawn, it is too wonderful. It is full, sunny daylight. Night was a long time ago, and so——" He stopped.

Bobbie was not quite sure whether he were still

serious or whether he were teasing her, but, believing it to be the latter, she continued in the same tone. "And so your dark hour is soon to come? You dear old pessimist! Do you know what will cause that hour? When I run away with another man."

He laughed full-throatedly. "In that case we are well ahead of to-night."

There was the slightest shuddering jar as the boat rubbed up alongside the quay, and the next moment a crowd of blue-coated porters swept on to the deck, and pandemonium broke loose. Stridently calling for custom, they were hailed by many. Directions were hurled to and fro, numbers shouted across intervening spaces.

The gangways dropped into position, the embarkation ticket collectors took their stations; so, pushing and scrambling, the passengers began to pour off. Verrell saw that it was time to make a move.

"Come on, Bobs," he said gaily, and, catching hold of her arm, they struggled forward into the press of travellers. A chance porter came along; Verrell hailed him and motioned to the pile of hand-baggage which stood aloof in one corner.

"*Oui, monsieur, trente-trois.*"

He touched the peak of his cap, and in a twinkling of an eye passed a strap through the handles of the four valises, and with a quick jerk hoisted the load across his shoulders.

They passed the next half-hour getting their luggage through the Customs. The Custom-house was a veritable babel of noise. Porters shrieked hoarsely at the imperturbable officers, endeavouring to attract their attention.

Some bags were turned inside out in the search for tobacco or cigarettes, others were chalked with but a cursory glance at the top layer of clothes.

To neither of them was the scene new or novel, and

yet both of them experienced again the thrill of pleasure, just as they had the first time they landed on the Continent, for as husband and wife this was their first trip together. Bobbie felt a bubble of contentment vaguely jumping up and down inside her. Soon she would be unpacking *his* clothes, tenderly hanging them up, carefully putting them away. Soon their clothes would mingle; the lingering fragrance of the perfume from her lingerie would scent his heavier garments. She herself would take care of his studs, tie-pins, links; so that they would not be lost she would allot them to a place where they would be surrounded by all her own odds and ends.

In a blissful haze she dreamed the minutes away so that she could scarcely realize it when their *porteur*, despite his diminutive height, having successfully pushed his way to the notice of a friendly Customs officer, installed and made her comfortable in her seat in the *rapide*.

Only a few more hours and they would be alone, free to talk unreservedly, to whisper confidences in one another's ears, to throw their arms around one another.

Bobbie closed her eyes in ecstasy. This was no time to talk. All she wished to do was to sit quiescently and think—and dream——

With a series of body-shaking jerks the *rapide* pulled away from Calais-Maritime, while Verrell settled himself comfortably in his seat. For some time he could not tear his gaze away from Bobbie. Heedless of the amused glances of their fellow-passengers, he metaphorically drank in every feature of her face; more glorious auburn-tinted hair, alive with its twinkling sheen, he felt, had yet to be painted; Titian himself could not have done justice to it.

Though her eyes were now shut, yet he could picture the expression in them—their bewitching sympathy,

their wistful romance, their puckish mischievousness. Intensely feminine, they were eyes to lead a man into the deepest depths of hell, to raise him to the highest pinnacles of love.

As for her mouth, with its mute, provoking invitation, it was no less enticing than the rest of her face, the sensitive nose, the shapely ears. From tip to toe she was delicate, fragile—and his wife! She was his, all his, until death should part them!

It was too wonderful, too ideally impossible; especially so when he chided himself on the fact that he did not deserve all that had come to him. What had his life been? And as happened so often when his thoughts turned on this subject, his mind reverted to the dim, misty past.

Of his very early life he knew nothing; his first memory of it seemed to jog awake at the thought of cruel and hated foster-parents. Concentrating further back, there was only a hazy recollection of a day when he was lost in a maze of streets, parted from the nursemaid who was supposed to be in charge of him.

Afraid of the passing people, who, to his childish imagination, assumed the stature of giants, he ran blindly on, hither and thither, while the running tears poured down his cheeks. Because he bowed his head his plight was unnoticed, until suddenly a hairy hand gripped his shoulders and he shrieked with the pain of the tightening grip.

Then followed a whirlwind scene of motors, of clattering horses, jostling people, yells, and shouts, during which a beery voice mumbled incoherently, until at last they reached a dismal alley, a quiet courtyard, and so up to a hovel where awaited a slatternly woman.

There was method even in the inebriated madness of his abductor, though at first the wife, who saw only that her husband had brought along another mouth to

feed, did not realize this. Yet, as he explained, her coarse face broadened out into a smile.

There followed weeks and months of brutal blows, of lessons in the art of picking pockets, until at last, out of fear of his teachers, his arms became nimble and his fingers deft. All is grist to a pickpocket's mill, and so he stole fruit, cakes, handkerchiefs, cheap pieces of jewellery, almost anything which he might transfer into one of his small pockets.

As he grew older so he was given more and more lessons, was taught to scale walls, slip window-catches, and open safes. During all this time he became taller and stronger and more daring, till at last there came the period of emancipation when he emerged from boyhood into virile manliness, and suddenly realized the fact that he no longer embarked upon his unlawful nocturnal escapades with an inborn loathing and disgust, but instead with a joyful eagerness, an insatiable appetite for adventure.

There came the time when, if he could but keep his foster-parents quiet, he no longer cared what his spoils were so long as he had the thrills, the excitement of the risk of obtaining the wherewithal to keep his slave-masters in liquor. Only when they were killed in an accident, when at last he was freed from the necessity of witnessing with disgust their drunken orgies, to listen to their fights and their vile language, did he stop to consider his position.

He knew then that his fine feelings, a relic of his birthright, urged him to escape his environment, to leave behind him the sordid slums. He did so, and in comparison found himself to be ignorant, uneducated, and uncouth.

Once again his blood had its way. With the proceeds of his hauls he educated himself, until at last the transition was complete and the slum-bred grub emerged into a polished, educated gentleman, who, as

a famous author, renowned for his crime stories, became a popular Society favourite.

During the Great War he did his bit magnificently; yet afterward he craved for excitement more than ever, and after a tussle between his conscience and his desires, he once again indulged his propensity for unlawful pursuits, and turned to crime, even though his books brought him in royalties which were more than ample for his simple requirements.

So as the years passed by he built up two reputations for himself—one as a writer, known to the world at large, and the other, known at first only to Scotland Yard, as that of Blackshirt, the elusive cracksman, whom in vain the bulldog detectives of the Yard endeavoured to identify and arrest.

Such was the life he led—author by day, cracksman by night—until his awakening, the moment he fell in love. From that time he saw himself as the world would have judged him; on that day commenced the reformation of Blackshirt, until at last he judged himself more worthy of Bobbie.

Now he was married to her and she was opposite him; his for always. Her eyes suddenly flickered open, and he gazed full into their depths.

Happy! He felt there ought to be a better, a more extravagant word than that to express his overpowering emotion. He was not just happy, he was living in a halcyon rapture; and he did not tell her with his lips all he thought; she read it from his eyes, and sighed contentedly.

Two hours ticked by, and when he glanced at his wrist-watch she lifted her forehead questioningly and smiled.

"Nine-fifteen," he announced. "Not much longer now, dear. In less than two hours we shall be in Paris."

How must Fate, the mysterious controller of des-

tinies, have chuckled when, weaving the complicated pattern of life's circumstances, she heard the echo of his words.

On the engine platform the driver's mate also glanced at the time.

"You are fourteen minutes late, Jules."

Jules growled and his hand moved slightly; the needle of the speedometer quivered and moved forward. Madly the iron monster rushed into the darkness, screeching and wailing in an effort to make up the lost fourteen minutes.

Another slight movement of Jules's hand, and the sensitive needle quivered again, and once more crept forward, while the long train of coaches behind rocked ominously.

Bobbie's head jerked against the cushioned back. She frowned slightly and glanced out of the window.

Verrell read her thoughts. "Don't you worry, dear. All French trains rock like this. We shall be all right."

Mistress Fate laughed again. He was an impertinent man to make such rash prophecies, and must be taught a lesson. The thread of his life, for instance—supposing she slipped it so——

There was a jarring crash, a heartrending roar of cracking timbers, of groaning metal, then the shrieks of human fear echoed from coach to coach. Jules would drive the *rapide* no more, for he, too, lay dead in the ghastly wreckage of the engine and its train.

* * * * *

Verrell awoke, struggling to evade the clutches of an overpowering blankness which endeavoured to engulf him in its depths. He knew he must keep away from the inky pit which yawned before him, but the effort of it wracked his head with pain until he wished to give way, to dive into the blackness of the beyond.

His body and his brain ached and throbbed with agony; so intense was it in his head that it flashed vividly in circles before his eyes: it was almost as if he watched a thunderstorm.

He groaned, and from a long distance it seemed to him that a voice said blurringly and indistinctly: "Poor fellow! He seems to be coming round now, but it was a narrow squeak."

About whom were they talking? Why were they talking? He felt a surge of anger. How dare they talk when his head was so bad, as if it were not aching enough without the extra noise to worry him!

Heavens! his head, his head! Never before had he known such agony was possible. The slightest noise echoed thunderingly, the least movement tortured him. It was bursting with pain, splitting open——

Subconsciously he forced his eyes open, probably obeying an instruction from a memory cell. It seemed to him that there was something he ought to remember. At first he saw only darkness, but slowly he realized that there was an extraordinary number of pin-pricks of light relieving the black. They were—no, not moving, unless it were they were moving in small circles—but undoubtedly they were winking—or should it be twinkling?

Twinkling! What twinkled? Did he not know of some little rhyme which he dimly remembered having learned in his youth about telling something to twinkle? Twinkle—little star!

Memory returned in full force. At one moment sitting in a railway carriage opposite Bobbie, and the next lying flat on the ground looking up into the starry sky. What did it mean?

He sat up, and reeled with the spasm of vertigo which attacked him. His head revolved in every direction, but with an effort of will he forced his eyelids wider apart so that he could see.

Some fifty yards in front of him lay the skeleton of the *rapide*, smashed and battered. The front coaches lay on their side, crushed into shapeless ruins. This he observed in a fleeting glance. The next second he was conscious of a worse horror, inconceivable in its terrible reality, for the scene was lit from leaping flames which crackled startlingly in the still night air, roaring with a demoniac fury. The *rapide* was on fire. The unquenchable, devastating flames were wiping out what was left of the wreck.

Shadowed and silhouetted by the licking, avaricious flames, ghoulish-looking passengers ran helplessly to and fro, vainly endeavouring to rescue from the débris doomed men and women, crushed and wedged beneath the immovable wreckage.

Not alone were the eyes stricken with heart-breaking anguish. The air resounded with the moans of the hurt who lay all around him, and, worse still, above even the noise of the fired coaches, arose the sobbing, terrified shrieks of the helpless victims of the conflagration who lay in the path of the devouring flames.

"Bobbie, Bobbie!" Chokingly he gasped aloud her name, and partly raised himself up. Someone standing near turned round. "Lie down, man," he ordered emphatically, "you must lie still, otherwise you may kill yourself."

Verrell scarcely heard the words. Bobbie! Where was Bobbie? Staggeringly he lifted himself still higher till he was standing upright. Suddenly his head whirled, the phantasmagoric scene before his eyes seemed to twirl around in circles.

He would have fallen, but the man who had spoken to him caught and steadied him in time.

"I am a doctor," he said gruffly. "Don't you understand what I say? Your head is split open."

Verrell gazed at him frantically. "Where is my wife, my Bobbie? She was sitting opposite, and

then—— Where is she, I say?" His voice rose hysterically.

The doctor patted his shoulder. "Steady on, man. If you go on like that—— What will your wife say if she finds you—dead?"

The suggestion percolated into his subconsciousness, and Verrell realized that for Bobbie's sake he must steady himself. He forced himself to think rationally, though the effort jagged his brain with searing streaks of pain.

"Yes, yes, you are right, doctor," he said weakly. "Won't you help to find her? When I do I will rest. I swear it."

The doctor hesitated, then made up his mind. "I am too busy, but——" He called to a man near by. "Take this gentleman carefully, Bill, and help him find his wife."

Bill came forward and placed strong arms under Verrell's shoulders. "Steady, old man, steady," he murmured sympathetically. "We will soon find her."

Despite his comforting words Bill felt a constricting pain round the region of his heart. If the man's wife were all right, why was she not by her husband's side? He felt afraid, and nerved himself up for the shock which he felt would be coming to the weakened man whom he practically supported in their hesitating walk.

Fortunately Verrell felt no such qualms. He was only madly anxious to see his wife's face just once more before he laid his splitting head to rest. He was sure she would be quite safe. God could not let his little Bobbie be hurt!

The line of injured stretched significantly away in the darkness. Verrell, wrapped up in his optimism, gave but a cursory glance at the men and women who lay or sat about, their wounds bandaged temporarily with handkerchiefs, pieces of torn shirts, or delicate

lingerie. He wanted to join the large group which was by the capsized coaches, extricating those whom they could manage to rescue. Falteringly the pair moved on.

They covered the ground as far as people were to be seen, but there was no trace of Bobbie. She was nowhere to be seen, and Verrell's heart grew cold. For the first time he began to have doubts; hysteria began to gain an upper hand, despite all his efforts to remain calm.

Up and down, and in the meanwhile his steps grew weaker and weaker, the burden on Bill's arm heavier. There was no Bobbie. Verrell's eyes gleamed wildly, his mouth moved spasmodically, and he ground his teeth. Where was she? God! where was she?

Then, just in front of them, a charred and blackened body was pulled from under a still smouldering portion of one of the coaches. The clothes were in cinders, the hair burned to the scalp. Only by a pitifully scorched breast which parted the crumbling garments could it be distinguished that the corpse was that of a woman.

Verrell gazed down upon all that remained of what was once, barely an hour ago, a living, palpitating human being. He felt sick and giddy, and closed his eyes to shut out the gruesome sight.

"Poor woman!" A man near by spoke with a voice broken by sobs. "She will never be recognized. Someone will be marked down as missing, a daughter or a wife, perhaps! This might be she. God! what a death, what a death!"

"Is there no means of identification at all?" Another man standing by put the question.

"How can there be? Here is the doctor!"

Verrell opened his eyes. The doctor was hurrying along. When he arrived he bent over the corpse; in doing so he made a queer clucking noise in his throat. Even he was shocked. He looked away for a few seconds; then, throwing up his head, faced his task.

Carefully he stripped away the charred clothes, and inch by inch searched the body for marks of identification. Not until he came to the right arm did he say anything, and then it was only a muttered "Ha!"

Some significance in the tone of his voice attracted the attention of those standing around, and they leaned nearer.

"Her right hand is clenched," said one.

Gently the doctor prised open the hand, not yet stiffened by rigor mortis, and by the light from the fire they could see it held a ring.

"It looks like an engagement ring. Someone will recognize this."

"What is it like? My daughter—I—I cannot find her!" A grey-haired man, the tears streaming down his face, bent anxiously toward it. "I—I cannot see it. My eyes are misty."

"A half hoop of diamonds, with a single emerald in the middle."

There was a sigh of relief, a muttered "God be praised!" and the grey-haired father moved on.

Verrell did not move. "A single emerald in the middle!" he muttered stupidly. Then suddenly he collapsed, and his body slumped across that of the corpse, so that his lips mingled with the cold, lifeless lips of the woman.

The ring was one he had given Bobbie!

* * * * *

Days and nights of unceasing torture passed by; Verrell lay in a hospital bed and, even in the delirium which scarcely ever left him, prayed that he might die.

His head was never quiet, never peaceful. Its bursting pain was no worse than the burning rumination of his chaotic, disordered brain. When at rare intervals his head did not revolve with the agony of the wound, his thoughts tortured him so that sometimes he

groaned aloud, writhing beneath the anguish of his hallucinations.

Bobbie, his Bobbie, dead! That much he knew, and he cursed the world, its people, and reviled its Creator. His Bobbie; he wanted his Bobbie! His heart-broken cries for her filled the ward in which he lay; even the hardened nurses wept in sympathy.

Day by day, as the crisis approached, his inward reflections grew worse with his condition. His soul was filled with fury; he swore vengeance on the world which had treated him so, until the time came when he changed his mind and wished to live, solely that he might put his revengeful plans into execution.

At last the crisis! For twenty-four hours he tossed and turned, moaning and cursing alternately. Two doctors took it in turns to watch by his bedside, and as his temperature crept infinitesimally upward they despaired of his life.

A virile manhood, a balanced vitality wrestled with the grim stranglehold of the Reaper, and slowly the man gained the upper hand. All at once he broke into a sweat, his agonized face calmed into smoother lines, he breathed more easily, and the doctors knew that their efforts had been successful, that their patient would live.

The crisis was such in more ways than one; as his health improved, Verrell's memory of the train wreck faded, and with it his remembrance of Bobbie. Day by day he was less conscious of her existence, till one day he opened his eyes, fully recovered.

There was a gap in his life; he knew only that he was Blackshirt, that dimly he bore a grudge against the world. On the day he walked free of the hospital he smiled grimly. Now back to London again, there to take his revenge, the longing for which rankled at the back of his mind even while he was puzzled to know the reason of it.

Without a word to anyone, he disappeared, and so by a day missed his father-in-law, Sir Allen Dunn, who, on the advice of the French doctors, had waited for Verrell's recovery before crossing the Channel to visit him.

* * * * *

In reply to a summons from Sir Allen Dunn, Marshall took the last omnibus to Notting Hill Gate. Sir Allen was out, but was expected back at any moment, so Marshall decided to wait. It had gone one o'clock, but—well, he could walk home. It would do him good.

With a puzzled frown creasing his forehead he turned over in his mind what possibly could be the reason of the urgency, and studied the note for the twentieth time. It was quite short—would he call on Sir Allen at once?—and his keen eye noted the hurried, hesitating writing. The pen had wavered uneasily, the chirography betrayed a disturbed mind, was utterly unlike its usual characteristic precision.

In just over ten minutes Sir Allen returned. Marshall gazed at the baronet in bewilderment. The face of his host was drawn and haggard, there were ominous black circles round his eyes, and his hair was ruffled, untidy, even a little whiter.

"Thank God, Marshall, you are here at last!"

"Yes, Sir Allen, I came directly I received your note. It seemed to me that you were worried."

"Worried!" Sir Allen laughed harshly, then suddenly glanced at Marshall with a queer expression in his eyes. "Don't you know the awful news, then?"

The detective shook his head. "No, sir. You mean there is something wrong?"

Sir Allen's head dropped. "You have read the newspapers lately?"

"Only slightly, sir. I have been busy on a case which finished yesterday."

"Surely you read of the French train wreck four weeks ago?"

"I saw the headlines, that was all." Suddenly his lips twitched, and his eyes filled with an expression of fear. "Good heavens, sir! surely neither Mr. nor Mrs. Verrell were hurt? I—I did not connect the journey with the one they were taking."

Slowly Sir Allen shook his bowed head. "Worse than hurt, Marshall. Bobbie—Bobbie"—his voice filled with choking sobs—"Bobbie was killed—burned to death!"

Marshall could not speak. The incredible news left him mentally stunned. His face worked spasmodically, slowly a tear gathered in the corner of each eye, where it swelled till at last it trickled slowly down his furrowed cheeks.

"Sir Allen—Sir Allen——" He could not finish.

Sir Allen raised his head. "Do not try to say anything, Marshall. The news took me in the same way. Yet there is—is worse. My son-in-law was seriously hurt; it was touch and go whether he would live or not, but the doctors pulled him round. As soon as he could walk and was well enough to see anyone they sent for me, but the day before I arrived there—he—he disappeared, Marshall, vanished without a word into thin air."

"Good heavens!"

"That was a week ago. Since then I have neither seen nor heard of him, nor has anyone else. I have been in touch with his publishers, his literary agents, his friends, but in vain. What has happened I do not know, but I am afraid. Perhaps—suicide. Ah! Marshall, the uncertainty is unnerving me. All my efforts have failed to trace him, yet I must find him somehow. He is my only link with Bobbie. Marshall, I need your help, will you help to search for him?"

The ex-detective did not think twice. "Not

only for your sake, Sir Allen — I — I liked Mr. Verrell."

* * * * *

The sharp bite of the early spring air was more than welcome to Marshall as he set out for home, and he breathed it in with deep, regular gulps till his head was clear and freshened by its intoxicating and dewy freshness.

Once, in the days before he had been promoted to the C.I. Department of Scotland Yard, he had been a policeman, but that was many years ago. In those days there were no flashing limousines, briefly revealing beautifully gowned women and immaculately attired escorts, to break the empty peace of night beats. The motors of that decade had been cumbersome, snortingly advertising their progress.

There were other changes too. Streets were better lit now; the penetrating electric lights peeped into corners previously shadowed by flickering gas-lamps. There were more houses, more by the thousand, and many more miles of streets to protect, and while there were more blue-coated guardians, there were less light-fingered gentry "on the job."

It was inevitable that his memory should move forward in sympathy with his progress. Step by step he had been advanced by his superiors; it was regretted by all when he retired. Inexorably the years had crept by—Father Time had laid his hand upon the detective, and so, from a loved, adventurous career he was plunged into a life of placid monotony.

Even at this point there were still memories. His forehead puckered and his eyes saddened. But his thoughts were quickly interrupted. Just by the next lamp stood a silent watchman of the night.

Marshall slightly turned his head away as he approached the other man.

"Good-night, constable," he murmured.

"Good-night, sir," replied the other solemnly.

Marshall chuckled, and the policeman hearing it, glanced sharply at him. "What's the joke?"

"All right, Smithy, keep your hair on."

"Well, I'm blest, if it isn't old Marshall." He shot out his hand. "It's some time since I seen you, old man. What's happened, retired?"

"Yes, worse luck."

Smith laughed. "Go on, you old hypocrite. You aren't sorry. Wisht I was you. This winter's been the blinking limit. Wet! Gosh! something like the Flood, I should say. What about you in your nice cosy bed?"

"All right, Smithy," retorted Marshall amiably. "You'll see one of these days. Why, I'd give my little finger for a spice of excitement, a murder or a good haul, or something of that sort. Life's as dull as ditch-water."

"Why don't you set up on your own?"

"I have, more or less. I am kept quite busy, but what at? Trailing around after errant wives or unfaithful husbands. Makes me sick with life to see how some people carry on."

"Ah, well! Marshall, old man. I ain't like you. I don't care what you say. Me for a nice soft time when I am retired. I have no wish to die in me boots, even if you have. Cheerio, old chum! All the best!"

Like ships in the night they passed on, the policeman to continue his beat one way, Marshall his journey home the other.

He had not exaggerated to his old acquaintance in the Force. The ex-detective was one who loved his work, and lived for it, and now that his time was up it seemed to him that something was missing from life, that his existence was empty, emotionless.

Of what had he been thinking just before he recognized Smithy? Ah, yes! At any rate, there had been one episode which had happened since his retirement, upon which he looked back with pleasure. "The episode of Blackshirt!" he always named it.

Perhaps of all who knew Blackshirt, the one who appreciated mostly the fine qualities of the cracksman was Marshall, because only Marshall knew the tremendous possibilities there had been of Blackshirt degenerating into a common thief. Instead he had carved out a career for himself, an honourable vocation which brought him the respect of the world and, better still, self-esteem.

No longer was he Blackshirt, *alias* Richard Verrell, the novelist. In these days he was Richard Verrell, firstly and foremost, Blackshirt being relegated to the dim fastnesses of his memory. His past was past, there to be kept, bolted and barred by the metal of love, the door guarded by a lovely keeper—the memory of his Bobbie, his adorable, beautiful Bobbie.

There had been in Marshall's heart a soft spot for the two children, as he called them. If he admired Verrell, his feeling for Bobbie had been almost one of love, a kindly, paternal affection in keeping with his many extra years.

Since that handshake at Lady Dwight's ball, a firm friendship had been cemented between the ex-detective and the ex-criminal, and Marshall had been told that he was to be a welcome visitor at Verrell's new home when the newly married couple returned from France. A tear trickled from the corner of his eye. Tragedy, stark and terrible, had entered into Verrell's life. How would it affect him——? To where had Verrell disappeared?

With a startling suddenness Marshall halted. Habits are hard to alter, and so, even while he had given his thoughts full play, his eyes, searching, seeking, had

wandered from side to side of the road, as of yore, alert for the slightest sign of untoward happenings, of any suspicious shadow, of every moving leaf.

He was still on Smithy's beat, and Smithy, he knew, was several streets away. If he (Marshall) were aware of this fact, it was more than probable that so were others; therefore—for what reason did a furtive shadow dart round the side of a house across the road at the sound of his footsteps?

It was the merest, flashing glimpse which he caught, and that only out of the corner of his eye; but it was sufficient to warn him that someone had reason for not wishing to be seen, and at nearly two o'clock in the morning it was enough to cause any policeman to commence investigating.

Like the veteran he was, the sight set his blood tingling. This was like the old days; if he got busy off his own bat he knew Smithy would have nothing to say. Beside, if he should make a capture, the regular policeman could have the credit. All that he wanted was a spell of the old excitement.

Firstly, he must continue his walk. To allay suspicion he lighted a cigarette. That action would account for his stopping. By the time he disappeared round the corner he hoped the shadow across the road would relax his guard.

As if he had seen nothing, he kept on his way to the corner and turned around it. Then, out of sight, he quickened to a run. With an ease born of practice, he moved on the tips of his toes; there was but the faintest echo of his footsteps to be heard. Fifty yards or so, a corner, another two hundred yards, another corner, a parallel fifty yards, and by then he had traversed the block and was practically back at the spot from where he had seen the movement.

Keeping to the shadow of the house he surveyed the road opposite, but nothing stirred. So far as he knew

it was safe for him to follow in the track of the shadow, but even then he used the utmost caution in rounding the last corner and darting across the street.

He had noticed that it was the third house from the corner. The houses were detached; between each one was a narrow space, divided by a wooden fence. He suspected it to be a tradesmen's entrance to the back, a supposition which proved itself correct. The passage led past the back door into a garden; it was too dark to see how large was the latter.

He was now on gravel, for he both heard and felt it crunching beneath his feet. He dared not move quickly now, for, having got so far, he did not wish to alarm the intruder; that was, of course, assuming his deductions were correct.

He came to a small window, securely fastened. From its proximity to the back door he believed it to belong to the scullery. He moved on; the next window was also fastened. No one had entered there. The next glass he touched was, if he could believe his fingers, the upper part of a door; it did not need much acumen to pronounce it a door leading into the garden.

This door likewise was fastened; although with preternatural care he twirled the handle, he could neither push nor pull. He began to think he had made a very big mistake. He continued, still treading warily. Fortunately so; otherwise he would have tripped over a step.

He stretched out a hand to save himself falling. Whatever he touched gave way; he only just saved his balance, but inwardly he chuckled. He had stumbled against open French doors. His suspected burglar was within!

He listened carefully before he moved again, but there was no sound, and he stepped up and into the room.

He could not see a hand in front of him, but by

feeling every inch of the way he was enabled to move without accident, though this performance conveyed the impression to him that every inch of the floor was covered with furniture.

Then an open door! In front of him a hallway, and across it a gleam of light. His heart beat triumphantly. He covered the intervening space and applied his eye to the crack in the door.

The room was but faintly lit, and that only by the reflection from a rather large, electric torch, carefully propped up so that its beam threw a light upon a locked cupboard. Then Marshall saw the man he had tracked standing there working on the lock.

Marshall grinned. The burglar was going to have a very big surprise. He would just wait a few more seconds. Perhaps the other would turn round so that the detective could recognize him; even as he thought this the cracksman turned.

At that moment the triumph vanished; Marshall could feel nothing but a dull, gnawing sense of agony, unbelief, and disappointment. The man who had clandestinely entered the house and was now engaged in robbing it was dressed in familiar clothes—black trousers, black gloves, black mask, and black shirt. In other words, Blackshirt the cracksman, better known as Richard Verrell, the famous novelist, the writer of crime stories, himself an amateur criminologist!

* * * * *

So soon had he traced Sir Allen's son-in-law! No wonder the baronet had failed. No wonder Verrell had remained hidden.

Somehow or other Marshall made his exit noiselessly. Too dazed to think coherently, he was half-way home before he could collect his wits sufficiently to realize that he had failed Sir Allen. Charged to search for Verrell, coincidence had led him to within a few yards

of his quarry, and what had he done? Run like a frightened rabbit. And why?

He groaned. He did not know why, yet in reality it was that his kind old heart had wanted to save the boy the shame of being discovered in such circumstances.

He turned on his heels and ran back to the house which both Blackshirt and he had entered. He was too late. Blackshirt had disappeared into the whirlpool of the great Metropolis, and God alone knew when Marshall was likely to come across him again!

* * * * *

"Hepplewhaite!"

Hepplewhaite had just come into the office, and now he looked inquiringly across at the man who shouted.

"The chief wants you." Carruthers was too busy to say more; he was being worried to finish off the woman's column.

He seemed to be the only working member of the staff. Somehow the office seemed quiet, far too quiet for the peace of mind of everyone concerned. Unless something happened soon, instead of the rise of which some of them dreamed it would be the order of the boot!

"Hallo, chief! You want me?" Hepplewhaite sank into a vacant chair. Sanders swung round to face him.

"Yes. I want to talk to you. What I want to know is, what has gone wrong with the world? Has everyone turned parson? My hat! We haven't printed a stick of news worth anything for the past month. The divorces are the quietest we have ever had; not that that makes any difference in these days, now that reports of them are forbidden. The Communists and the Reds haven't even manhandled a Fascist lately, let alone kick up any sort of a worth-while shindy. There

has not been a railway accident in France, which is saying a lot; Germany persists in paying up her war debt; while the U.S. might be a Sunday-school for all the news we get out of her. As for the darn Government—Gosh! Hepplewhaite, it's terrible!"

Hepplewhaite grinned. "It's pretty putrid, I know. I've had supper in peace for the past three weeks. There's only one consolation. All the rest of the Press is in the same boat."

The chief frowned. "That's not the point. You know the standard set up by the *Evening Star*—'We lead, others follow.' Hepplewhaite, there must be news somewhere. I have been harping away at the Somerset case till I am heartily tired of it."

"It's no use, chief. I know what you feel, but I have searched high and low without any success. The only thing to do is to hire someone to blow up the Houses of Parliament, to go one better than poor old Guy Fawkes. I should think the firework people would finance the undertaking."

"Oh, shut up, Hepplewhaite. Your jokes get more rotten every day. What about Blackshirt? He made some good headlines while he lasted. You did a good day's work when you discovered him. Can't you rake him up?"

Hepplewhaite shook his head. "It's no use, chief. I have thought of him myself, but he seems to have entirely disappeared. I should say he is either in prison under another name, or else he died in that fire in the Mayer house."

"Well then, I wish to Heaven, if he is in prison, that he would escape. Isn't there anyone else following in his footsteps? Most murderers seem to have their imitators. However, this is what I had you in to say. I may be your chief, but there is an All-Highest. Our circulation has dropped, readers are wanting to know what has happened to the *Evening Star* If this con-

tinues, the All-Highest, Sir John Ballintyre, chairman of the board of directors, is going to raise Cain. He let out a nasty hint yesterday. For pity's sake, Hepplewhaite, do something; find me a 'splash.' You have a free hand. Now 'git.' We have worked together some good few years now, but"—he paused significantly—"you know it isn't my fault, Hepplewhaite. Things are not what they used to be. Shareholders play havoc with the Press nowadays."

Sanders swung round to his desk again, and Hepplewhaite made his exit—anything but a comfortable one.

Two days passed and nothing fresh happened. It seemed as though an unkind Fate had decided to work against the Press. The world might have been a Garden of Eden for all that happened.

Then the *International* pulled off a scoop. It was not much—a mere matter of a runaway marriage; but they made the most of it, and in the office of the *Evening Star* there was a weeping and a gnashing of teeth. The chief stormed, the All-Highest coughed nastily, and the staff scurried under cover as much as possible.

The next day was still more uncomfortable. Then out of a clear sky came a bolt from the blue, a friendly bolt, a bolt which came tearing into the office, yelling like a madman, dashing for the chief's office with the speed of a rocket. The staff stared, then breathed a gentle sigh. They knew the signs. Hepplewhaite had scooped again!

* * * * *

MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE TO THE "EVENING STAR"

The big black letters blazoned forth their message; not so much ink had been used for a long while. There, too, on the right-hand side, in letters almost as big, the news continued:

UNKNOWN CRIMINAL'S DARING

BLACKSHIRT AGAIN

To the Editor of the "Evening Star."

SIR,

Sir Austen Lavers is wrong. In his article which appeared in your paper last Tuesday he says: "An organized band of criminals, armed with all the latest devices of science, can always achieve better results in their nefarious practices than can an individual who works upon his own." He gives his reasons, many of them almost unanswerable in their correctness. "An organized band of burglars," he says, "can work more safely than the individual. While some of the men break open the safe, others are on guard at all parts of the attacked building. In the event of an alarm, one and all can escape before the police are anywhere near the scene of the operation. The single cracksman may be surprised unawares, and his arrest almost always becomes inevitable."

Sir Austin may be right, yet history proves that a band of criminals, never mind how excellently organized, is always smashed up eventually, and in most cases the disbandment is due to one of the members betraying the band to the police. Cartouche died in the end because of the treachery of one of his men, who sold him; the Kelly band were exposed by Aaron Sherritt, an old associate.

On the other hand, the identity of Jack the Ripper was never solved, nor was the mystery of Peter the Painter elucidated. Why? Because the first worked alone; and as regards the second, every member of the gang was killed. Under the

circumstances they could not very well "peach" upon him.

Sir, I, too, am a criminal. I work entirely on my own and challenge the police and the public to catch me. So confident am I of evading capture that, from time to time, I shall be willing to write to your newspaper warning you of my intentions. Forewarned is forearmed, it is said. We shall see.

As there is good in the worst of us, I will endeavour to do a certain amount of good. All newspapers pay their contributors. I shall expect you to send a cheque for £10 to charity for every letter I send you. Publication of this letter to be your acceptance of these terms.

BLACKSHIRT.

The *Evening Star* makes no apologies for printing the above. Certainly a cheque will be sent to a London hospital for every published letter received from this communicative criminal who is known as Blackshirt; but the *Evening Star* wishes to inform its readers and warns its contributor that it holds no brief for crime. The whole staff of the *Evening Star* will be engaged in tracking down and bringing to justice this malefactor. Time will show who will fare the better, organized Press or individual Blackshirt.

Such was the scoop, and the evening it was published all home-going London sat back in their seats in the trains, the tubes, and the omnibuses and gasped. Daring was too mild a word, if every word of it were true. It seemed to many sceptical readers that it was either bluff, or else a newspaper stunt.

Two days later placards of the *Evening Star* displayed the following:

ANOTHER LETTER FROM BLACKSHIRT

In less than twenty minutes the newsboys were sold out.

In the editorial offices the chief whistled happily to himself. When Hepplewhaite entered, Sanders's face was beaming.

"Good man, Hepplewhaite," he said. "This is the best thing for centuries. How did you get that first letter?"

"Pure luck. Nothing else but unadulterated, Heaven-blessed luck. It was shoved into my hands as I was walking down 'The Street.'"

"Luck! That doesn't sound like luck to me. More like deliberate intention."

"I mean luck that I was the one selected by this man Blackshirt as his postman. I might have been Bright of the *International*."

"Did you recognize the—shall we say the sender, or the giver, or whatever you like to call him?"

Hepplewhaite shook his head. "No. All I felt was the letter in my hand. When I turned round everyone seemed to be walking along quite naturally. I was too interested to know what was in the letter to take much notice then."

"You have read the latest edition? Well, then, you know our intention. You, too, must be at Lady Kingston's ball, and, if you can, catch him in the act. I am detailing young Smith to assist you as you think best. If you do catch him I don't think you will find the All-Highest lacking in appreciation. Go to it, Hepplewhaite, and with the help of your pen we will make the readers sit up and take notice. Blackshirt ought to be worth an extra hundred thousand circulation to us at least."

* * * * *

Society always looked forward to a fancy-dress ball held by Lady Kingston at her home in Park Lane.

Next to Court functions it was considered the premier affair of the season.

Of this the general public was scarcely aware, and still less interested as a general rule; but of this night the same could not be said. Round Lady Kingston's mansion was clustered a crowd of nearly two hundred people, curious idlers who forsook their usual pitches in the park to gather round and watch the house which Blackshirt boasted he would burgle that night.

Blackshirt's second letter to the *Evening Star*, following so quickly on his first, created a sensation. Coolly to warn the world at large that he intended to be present at Lady Kingston's ball and there to rob the guests of whatever he could was bizarre enough, but to hope to get away safely was impossible, and there was scarcely a reader of the *Evening Star* who did not anticipate the capture that night of the cracksman.

Hence the crowd which patiently hovered round Kingston House, pushing, here and there, to obtain a glimpse into the brilliantly lit interior, where the scene was most resplendent.

Inside the atmosphere was electrical with excitement; there was not one who was not conscious of the tension. Mostly eyes sparkled; this threat from a mysterious criminal was spice to the guests' enjoyment, something new, original.

Lady Kingston herself was taking no chances. Every entrance to the house, other than that through which the guests were arriving, was shut, barred, and bolted, outside each paced a sceptical constable. Nearly every window was shut tight; those which were left open for ventilation were guarded by footmen engaged for the occasion.

Every guest who entered had to present a card of invitation — and there was not one who was not recognized by the major-domo.

Most of the arrangements had been made by Hepple-

whaite. It was he who had called the attention of Lady Kingston—she who never read the "yellow" *Evening Star*—to Blackshirt's threat. At first she had scoffed at the whole idea, but Hepplewhaite had told her all he knew of Blackshirt, of the seemingly impossible coups which that elusive cracksman had successfully brought off, and in the end, afraid of the possible scandal of one of her guests being robbed, she gave *carte blanche* to Hepplewhaite to see that her home was unmolested.

Among those who arrived in taxi-cabs—and the number was decidedly in the minority—were Hepplewhaite and Smith.

When Hepplewhaite shook hands with Lady Kingston she bowed politely, then, having murmured a conventional greeting, she said softly:

"Presently, Mr. Hepplewhaite, in the library."

The numbers continued to swell; the ballroom became more and more a place of carnival. The scene was a picture, a painting of hectic colour, a rainbow. Yet the chatter, the laughter, and the strains of the orchestra were not sufficient to dispel a certain atmosphere, a double-barrelled tension composed of two widely separated emotions—one of pent-up anticipation, a feverish excitement, and the other romance.

A masked ball, insidiously alluring in its grip of romance and mystery, its suggestion of fleeting love, its possibilities of adventure, heightened this night, for, until 1.30 a.m., every dancer was asked to remain masked.

Lady Kingston arrived in the library within three minutes of Hepplewhaite. Now that she had no longer to keep her expression in repose, the reporter noticed that her face looked worried.

"I am nervous," she said. "Are you quite sure everything is in order?"

"I do not see how it can be otherwise. You are quite certain that Blackshirt is not in the house at the moment?"

"Quite. Everyone dancing is known personally to me; every temporary servant here I have employed before."

"Then, as Blackshirt is not already here, how can he possibly get in?"

"It is you, Mr. Hepplewhaite, who have persuaded me that the man will try to carry out his plan." There was a reproving note in her voice, and Hepplewhaite flushed.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Kingston. In putting those questions to you I was more or less asking myself."

"Is there no possibility that the letter to your paper was the work of a practical joker?"

"Every possibility! Yet—perhaps it is more an instinct on my part than anything else—I have a feeling that Blackshirt will come to-night, that this man will do his best to make good his boast."

Lady Kingston sighed. "I do hope he does not succeed. I dread the thought of the notoriety that would follow. There has been too much given to this dance already."

"Your guests do not seem to think so."

The hostess smiled. "They are mostly young, Mr. Hepplewhaite. They rather welcome the novelty. I must not stop longer. Remember I am relying upon you to keep Blackshirt away."

Hepplewhaite looked doubtful. "I will do my best, but——"

At length the clock struck the hour of half-past twelve. By this time most of the guests had arrived and the company warmed up. There was a bustling motion on the floor as the dancers sorted themselves into pairs for the dress parade, for prizes, presented

by Lady Kingston, were to be given for the finest costumes.

The orchestra struck up a lively march; two by two the competitors capered round, most of them endeavouring to act up to their parts. The judges surveyed them critically, but their minds were soon made up, at any rate, for the first gentleman's prize, for, haughtily, disdainfully, a magnificently equipped Indian rajah slowly paced the floor. Next to him was a slave girl, the black mask scarcely discernible against her tanned face. His costume was of snowy-white material freely decorated with gold braid; more noticeable still were his resplendent jewels. Rope upon rope of pearls hung round his neck. His fingers blazed with jewelled rings, big rubies blinking, opals twinkling. In his turban, like a large star shining from amid a nest of fleecy clouds, a big diamond coldly glittered. Jewels everywhere; and the fact that they were paste did not belittle the *tout ensemble*.

Round and round marched the parade; but the result was too apparent, and in due course the rajah received the prize—a handsome gold-and-amber cigarette-holder.

Other prizes were given, the parade broke up; then the ball echoed with the music of a fox-trot; Robin Hood seized Helen of Troy, and Wat Tyler a Spanish dancer.

Five minutes to one: in just over half an hour the unmasking would begin. Then, even as the orchestra stopped, breathless, a shriek of horror rang through the room.

It was Mrs. Pendelbury, wife of the American ambassador. "My necklace," she cried. "My necklace—it has been stolen."

There was a dead stillness: not one there who did not realize what had happened. Despite every precaution which had been taken, Blackshirt had secured

admittance into Lady Kingston's house and made good his boast.

Nobody spoke or moved; there was an uneasy atmosphere. Already suspicion was in the air. At this juncture Sir Edward Ayrstone, uncle of Lady Kingston, stepped forward into the centre of the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, and his voice travelled round weirdly, so still was the ballroom, "there is no need to enter into explanations. We have all been expecting this. Yet I still fail to believe that Blackshirt will succeed in his object.

"No one has left the house—this room even—for I have been standing by the door ever since the parade, and I happen to have particularly noticed the necklace on Mrs. Pendelbury while she was in the parade. It must have been stolen just afterward.

"While we must not lose sight of the fact that it is possible that the necklace may have dropped, we must take no chances. We will search the floor, and if the jewellery is not found——" He hesitated. "I am sorry, gentlemen, but if you have no objection I shall come round to you one by one and ask you to turn out your pockets, and I suggest Lady Kingston be good enough to look over the ladies."

There was a chorus of affirmation; most of the guests present were young enough to treat the whole affair as a game; then the search began. But no jewellery was found on the floor or elsewhere. There seemed abundant proof that somewhere in the ballroom was the thief, still with the necklace in his possession.

For the next quarter of an hour the men filed into one little anteroom, the ladies into another. Sir Edward personally searched each man, but in the end the missing necklace was not found by him, nor did his niece meet with any better result.

Just as mysteriously as Blackshirt had stolen the

necklace—if it were indeed he who had done so—so as cunningly had he hidden it. At the end of half an hour the prospect of recovering it was considered hopeless, and the dance continued.

* * * * *

Unmasking time! Still no one had left the house. Surely, now, if Blackshirt were there he would be discovered?

Side by side Hepplewhaite and Lady Kingston raked the ballroom with their eyes, carefully studying everybody there, yet everyone was known to the hostess: of them all there was not one to whom she could point with the slightest suspicion.

It was Hepplewhaite who first noticed that the Indian Rajah was not to be seen. Lady Kingston saw his puzzled face and instinctively felt that he had obtained a clue.

"You have an idea, Mr. Hepplewhaite?"

"Just a glimmering of one, Lady Kingston. Tell me, can you see the winner of the first prize, the Indian Rajah?"

She did not reply; she was too busy peering at the crowded dancers. In the end she turned to the journalist.

"No, I do not see him. Why, what do you think?"

"Think!" Hepplewhaite's voice fairly thrilled. "I am beginning to think I know the solution to the mystery. I am sure of it. If I am right this Blackshirt is more daring than I ever gave him credit. His nerve must be astounding, preposterous."

"I do not understand!" Lady Kingston fidgeted impatiently.

"Don't you remember, Lady Kingston, the Rajah? Was he not covered with jewels from head to foot, covered with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, opals—and pearls?"

"Yes, yes."

"Was not Mrs. Pendelbury's necklace of pearls?"

"Yes."

"Then I am sure I know now." Hepplewhaite was triumphant. What a scoop for the *Evening Star!* "This Indian Rajah was Blackshirt. Somehow or other he secured those pearls. Find the Rajah and you will find the pearls."

Lady Kingston stared at him helplessly. "You must be wrong, Mr. Hepplewhaite. Was not every man present searched?"

"Yes! But the Rajah did not put those pearls in his pocket. He did not even hide them. What he did was—to hang them round his neck, where they were to be seen all the time he was searched. With so many strings of pearls round his neck, would one more be noticed? Please credit me, Lady Kingston, with the fact that I believe that to be the true solution. Search for the Rajah if you like. I doubt whether you will find him now."

Nor did they. Kingston House was searched high and low, but no Indian Rajah was found. That he had not passed through door or window every man on guard was ready to swear. It was as if he had dissolved into the air like a puff of smoke.

* * * * *

The chief was delighted. He had motored up to the office from his home in the Caterham Valley. Everywhere he saw the placards of the *Evening Star* with its heavy announcement:

BLACKSHIRT
WINS

and everyone he saw appeared to be perusing the first edition. Hepplewhaite's pen had flowed easily.

Dramatically, forcibly, he had spun the story out. It might have been believed clever fiction, but for the fact that there were too many witnesses to guarantee every word he had written as the truth.

No sooner had the chief arrived than he sent for Hepplewhaite.

"Fine, fine," he congratulated. "It's the best story we have ever printed. The only thing is, to where the devil did the man disappear?"

Hepplewhaite shrugged his shoulders. "Only Blackshirt himself can tell you."

The chief leaned forward. "For mercy's sake keep this Blackshirt in the news. Search him out, trap him, do anything you like, but keep him in the headlines. You remember what I said about the All-Highest?" The chief grinned. "I am almost glad Blackshirt did get the better of us this time. It will encourage him. Don't forget, Hepplewhaite—keep Blackshirt on the front page."

How had the Indian Rajah disappeared? The question was on everybody's lips the next day. No one could even hazard a possible explanation.

Only Blackshirt knew. In the privacy of his bedroom the next morning he smoked a cigarette through a gold-and-amber cigarette-holder and chuckled.

A monk's habit, like Charity, had, the night before, covered a multitude of sins.

It had been so easy to make the Indian Rajah disappear. He had not gone far, merely beneath a simple but effective disguise, that of a monk's habit, with its heavy cowl, completely concealing the head and almost the face, and its long cloak falling to the ankles. One fancy dress had hidden another.

Undoubtedly, thought Blackshirt at that moment, he had made his first score against the world.

THERE was no trace of Blackshirt. From one end of the town to the other Marshall had thrown out sensitive feelers in the shape of dependable assistants engaged by himself from the ranks of retired Scotland Yard detectives, able fellows whom he knew through personal experience, but all his efforts had been without result.

Since the night when Blackshirt had robbed Lady Kingston's guest of a pearl necklace, Marshall's face had lined considerably. Time had furrowed and engraved the passing years upon his face, but as yet had failed to impress any set expression upon it, except, perhaps, one of contentment, due to the comforting assurance of an orderly and righteous life.

What three-score-and-odd years had failed to do during that period, worry had accomplished in half as many days. Many emotions pulled at the heart-strings of the old detective. There was his friendship for Sir Allen Dunn, his paternal solicitude for Bobbie, who now, by a cruel twist of Fate, was but a memory, and finally a deeply set affection for Verrell himself.

Not without sympathy for the elusive cracksman who, a husband for a few hours only, had been robbed of the wife he loved with the passion of one who had known neither father nor mother, Marshall realized that the course Verrell had taken, in reverting to his old character, and practising his criminal tendencies with even more daring than before, would sooner or later bring him into the plodding, methodical hands of the law. When that time arrived—— But he hated to allow such a thought to cross his mind.

His position was all the more difficult because he

dared not allow Sir Allen to suspect for an instant that he (Marshall) knew definitely that Verrell was in London, for of all who were innocent of Verrell's real character, Sir Allen ranked foremost.

So day after day Marshall searched for traces of Verrell, but it seemed that Blackshirt was more cunning than ever, and time after time he had to reply in the same way to Verrell's heart-broken father-in-law.

Just lately the vague feeling of friendship between Sir Allen and Marshall had developed into a much closer bond of comradeship. Despite the vast differences in their relative positions, in spite of the fact that Marshall was born of yeoman stock, that Sir Allen was the fifth baronet of his line, they drew together.

It mattered not to Sir Allen that Marshall was somewhat uncultured; he saw only the honest ruggedness, the soul of pure gold which could be glimpsed beneath the brusque exterior. On Marshall's part he detected in his temporary employer a conscience as clean as his own, a brain even more deep-thinking.

So much did their friendship strengthen that, as the days passed and Marshall could obtain no information of Verrell's whereabouts, their sorrow became mutual, and Marshall might have been Verrell's father for the pain his continual failures caused him.

On only one point did they differ. More confident than Marshall himself in the detective's abilities, Sir Allen could read only one version of the disappearance of his son-in-law.

"Marshall, is it of any use that we go on deceiving ourselves in this way? Can you not realize what has happened? Richard, poor chap, heart-broken at the news of his wife's death, must have—have committed suicide." Marshall noticed the baronet turn his head away as he hastily blew his nose.

"You must not believe that for one moment, Sir Allen." Marshall's voice was confident. "Mr. Verrell

was not one to do that under any circumstances. His was too fine a nature, too courageous."

"Yes, yes, I know, but—you have not been in love, ever, have you, Marshall?"

"I am afraid not, sir. Somehow or other my life has been a very matter-of-fact one, or else I have seen too many lives wrecked by the ecstasy which goes under the name of love."

"That is all fiddlesticks. There are two kinds of love—one is wholly passion, one is essentially idealistic. Either one by itself can wreck a man; but the average love, the love of nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand, is a mixture of the two. Marshall, love is the strongest, most powerful force in all the world. Not even what I consider to be the next most potent emotion —namely, religion—can cleave true love in two.

"That is why I feel nervous that in a frenzy of despair Richard may have done what nothing else would have made him do. I believe that if, when I was his age, my wife had died, I might very possibly have contemplated such a step. As it was, when it did happen, after fifteen more than happy years, it—hurt, hurt like the Devil. Yet our life had been so wonderful, her end was so peaceful, that if I had done that it would have been a crime, the act of an ungenerous ingrate."

He stopped, and Marshall could see that he was thinking deeply. Then, as if he suddenly made up his mind, he turned to the detective with a determined air.

"Marshall, to-morrow we will go to Scotland Yard. We will have the rivers and the lakes dragged. I cannot stand this uncertainty. First Bobbie, and now Richard. Mona has gone to India with her husband for three years. I am left, and sometimes I feel—lonely." Again he turned away.

At that moment even sympathy did not hold a place

in Marshall's heart; only sudden alarm; and, startled out of his usual composure, he turned desperately to Sir Allen. "For God's sake don't do that, Sir Allen; don't let Scotland Yard know that Mr. Verrell is missing!"

Sir Allen glanced at him queerly, and noted the anxiety written across the features of the other man. "Why not?" he asked. "Why shouldn't Scotland Yard know that Richard is missing? A word to my old friend Lavers, and I do not doubt that I would get news almost immediately."

Not knowing what to reply, Marshall realized that it was necessary to do a thing he hated. "Do you think I have not already been in touch with Scotland Yard?" he lied. "I have friends there still, Sir Allen, and I can assure you they have no other news of Mr. Verrell. Why do I say not go to Scotland Yard? Because of the publicity, sir. Within a few hours the news would be blazoned across the front pages of every newspaper in the country, and I do not think that they would hesitate to make the same suggestion about Mr. Verrell's disappearance as you yourself have just done."

The baronet sighed. "You are right, Marshall."

* * * * *

Despite all his efforts, however, Marshall found as the days passed that it became harder than ever to prevent Sir Allen carrying out his suggestion, more so as the report continued to be: "No news, sir; no news!"

It was with the same words trembling upon his lips that Marshall dressed himself one afternoon to call upon his client. The detective still lived in the small flat above a greengrocer's shop in Shepherd's Bush, where his simple wants were attended to by the housekeeper who called each morning.

Even as he was adjusting his tie he heard a shrieking of brakes in the road below, and by the sound judged

that a car had come to a stop just outside. He crossed to the window, more from curiosity than for any other reason.

The car was Sir Allen's, and Marshall saw the chauffeur alight, then quickly cross the pavement. Convinced that Sir Allen wished to see him immediately, Marshall hurriedly donned his coat, and the next minute was downstairs, following the chauffeur across to the car.

Sir Allen was leaning out of the window awaiting him. His face was suffused with a radiant happiness, his eyes were dancing, his mouth twitching.

"Jump inside. Quick, for pity's sake!" And, scarcely allowing the detective time to step into the car, he noded to the chauffeur, and they shot off.

"You have news, Sir Allen?"

"News! News! Heavens, Marshall—I—I have more—more than that!" In his excitement the baronet stuttered, his words running into one another one minute, the next remaining unspoken because his tongue twisted so. "I can hardly—hardly tell—just now. A telegram from—from Paris, coming home immediately. Just time to meet the train at Victoria. I—I feel as if—dreaming. Tell me, Marshall, I—I am not asleep, am I?"

Marshall smiled. "No, Sir Allen. But—what on earth was Mr. Verrell doing in Paris?" The detective was somehow surprised. It had never occurred to him that after his last coup Blackshirt should have hurried off to the Continent. At the same time it perhaps explained why, despite all his efforts and those of his assistants, he had been unable to trace the elusive novelist.

At Marshall's words Sir Allen laughed hysterically, long peals of unrestrained mirth; laughed till Marshall glanced at him strangely, wondering whether the baronet's trouble had not turned his brain.

"Verrell—Verrell; who is talking about poor Richard?" At last he was able to speak, but now the tears ran down his cheeks, and he gasped for breath.

Marshall's heart turned cold. He saw the shaking hands of the other, observed the twitching lips, the gleaming eyes, and more than ever he felt afraid.

"You must not over-excite yourself, sir." He endeavoured to soothe Sir Allen, but the only response to his attempt was a fresh outburst of boisterous merriment.

"Oh, come, Marshall, why shouldn't I excite myself? Why aren't you? Why aren't you? Don't look so serious. Don't you believe the news?"

"I—I don't understand, sir. What news?"

"The news from Paris, man—Bobbie—coming home."

Bobbie! With a slight shudder which seemed to travel up his back from the bottom of his spine, Marshall felt that his worst fears were being confirmed, and it hurt him more than he dared admit to himself. If Sir Allen's symptoms were very bad it might mean an asylum—and the detective had come to look forward to his visits to the baronet, the cosy cheeriness of the rooms, the genial atmosphere of the house in Maybrick Avenue.

His expression must have betrayed the trend of his thoughts, for the baronet sobered, and though his eyes continued to twinkle with humour, he spoke more rationally.

"You think my brain is suddenly turned, don't you, Marshall? Then look at that." His hand stretched out and thrust a piece of crinkled paper in front of the detective.

> Father darling am well at last arriving home meet me 3.25 Victoria fondest love Bobbie.

Three times Marshall read the message through, fearful that his eyesight must have falsely misunderstood the words, but the clarity of the handwriting brooked of no mistake.

Word for word he assimilated the telegram, analyzing each one for the possibility of an ambiguous translation; but in the end he realized that there was no mistaking the meaning. There was but one interpretation to be placed upon the words. Even then there was no joy in his heart.

Unprejudiced by false optimism, he could only conceive that someone was playing a ghastly, monstrous joke upon Sir Allen. There was not the slightest possibility of Bobbie being alive—and mentally the detective's thoughts reverted to the day when he had first learned the sad news.

Upon leaving Sir Allen he had immediately gone to the nearest newspaper office and, consulting the files, had acquainted himself with the full facts of the fatal accident as reported to the English newspapers.

Special attention had been given to the death of Mrs. Verrell. In the first place, Bobbie had been the leader of a younger Society set, and the news of her was of special interest to the public, who knew of her from the constant newspaper reports. Secondly, as the wife of Verrell, popular novelist, she was of even more importance, while finally the tragedy of their romance had been the headline of many of the leading journals.

"Honeymoon Tragedy." Under the deep, inch-high letters the world was made acquainted with Verrell's horror, of his own injury, of his search for his wife, of the discovery of the charred and blackened corpse, and finally the finding of the ring, the sole means of identification.

If further proof were needed that the corpse were indeed that of Bobbie, every other person in the train

had been traced. The missing had been discovered, the dead identified.

Marshall hesitated openly to express his doubts, but, on the other hand, he was nervous of what might happen to Sir Allen when they arrived at Victoria only to find that a cruel mistake had been made. The baronet was worked up to a high pitch of nervous excitement. At the worst, the reaction might prove fatal.

"What is the matter, man? Don't you understand the telegram? It means that Bobbie, my daughter Bobbie, is alive—alive! Think of it, man, when all this time we have thought her dead." His voice rose in his excitement.

Marshall shook his head gravely. "Forgive me, Sir Allen—I—I cannot understand it. Are you——"

Sir Allen would not let him finish. "No more can I, Marshall; but what does that matter? A few more minutes now, and we shall hear from her own lips."

The car turned off into Hyde Park, and Marshall realized that he dared not say more in contradiction. To do so might effect the result of which he was so afraid.

On the other side of the Park the car turned into Hyde Park Corner, and quickly veered into Victoria.

They arrived none too soon; even as they reached the platform the long, handsome train gently steamed into sight, and gradually pulled to a standstill.

Friends and porters thronged the platform, there was a rush toward the doors of the train, but Marshall waited. Soon the people would thin out, and then Sir Allen would realize the truth.

He felt a trembling hand touch his arm. "You must use your eyes and look out for her, Marshall; mine are dim and misty; I can only see a blur."

Marshall swallowed, but with a firm voice assured his client that he would do so.

The seconds passed by. Passengers were still alighting, but only in ones and twos, not in the hitherto constant stream, and, as Marshall had suspected, there was no sign of Bobbie.

"Well, haven't you seen her yet?" Sir Allen's voice was impatient.

"Not yet, sir," replied the detective. "Perhaps—perhaps Mrs. Verrell may have missed it."

"Stuff and nonsense, man. Don't forget, according to her telegram, she is only just well. Perhaps she has a nurse and—my hat! Marshall, isn't that a nurse along there? Look—just alighting!"

Despite the tears of happiness dimming them, the father's eyes had proved sharper for once, than those of the detective, for when Marshall looked he saw that Sir Allen spoke the truth.

There was a nurse alighting, helping someone out, and then it seemed to Marshall that he looked upon a miracle. It was Bobbie—Bobbie, wan and pale, obviously weakened and pinched by illness, but still Bobbie, her face afire with a consuming anticipation, a bewitching smile.

"It—it——" Marshall could only speak with difficulty, for his throat was closed by an obstructing lump. "It is Mrs. Verrell, Sir Allen."

With a glad cry the old man hastened forward. "Bobbie, Bobbie," he called out with a gasp. The next moment father and daughter were wrapped in a close embrace, tears and lips mingling.

Marshall watched from a distance, conscious that his own eyes were smarting; but Sir Allen did not forget him. "Come along, man," he called out; "come along and look at her. Isn't she wonderful?"

Marshall moved along to the group, and did not fail to notice the sudden gleam of surprise which flickered into Bobbie's eyes. Nevertheless, she stretched out her hand and grasped his warmly; her lips murmured

politely. Yet all the time her eyes unceasingly wandered from side to side. Presently she frowned slightly.

She turned to Sir Allen. "Father dear—where—where is Richard? I sent him a telegram at the same time."

For a moment there was a dead silence. The mention of Verrell's name had caught them both by surprise; Sir Allen, in his new-found joy, could think only that his daughter was alive when he had thought her dead, gone from him for ever; and Marshall could not forget his disbelief in the authenticity of the telegram.

Both now stood still, saying nothing, and Bobbie looked from one to the other. "Father, darling, don't you understand? Where is Richard?"

In desperation he deliberately prevaricated. "He was not able to come, darling. I will explain later. But, come, you must hurry home as quickly as you can. You do not look well, child; we must not risk losing you again."

Not giving her time to think, he bustled her along into the car, Marshall and the nurse following. With loving hands the baronet tucked Bobbie into the corner and carefully wrapped her up. Then he turned to Marshall. "Jump in," he said; but the detective held back.

"No, Sir Allen; I can follow in a taxi. You will want to be alone."

"Nonsense, man; come along." His voice was in its old brusque tones, but his eyes pleaded desperately, and Marshall understood that he feared Bobbie's questions. Reluctantly he followed Sir Allen into the car and sat opposite.

"Now, my dear, perhaps you will explain." Sir Allen took his daughter's hand within his own.

Bobbie smiled. "But what is there to explain?" she asked.

Sir Allen turned to Marshall with a happy laugh.

"What do you think of that, Marshall? That is cool, is it not? Without a moment's warning we get a telegram from someone the world thought was dead, and then there is nothing to explain!"

"Dead!" Bobbie looked at her father aghast. "Father! What do you mean? Dead! Surely you haven't thought all this time that I have been—been dead? No, that is impossible. What of your letters to the hospital authorities?"

"My letters? But I have written none."

"Then they must have lied to me. Why? Why? Did they not write to you telling you that I was unconscious? Why, father——" She looked at him with a troubled expression in her eyes. "They gave me your letters just as I came away. I have them here in my bag, though I have not yet looked at them."

"Quick. Show them to me." There was anger in his voice as Sir Allen slowly realized all the grief he and Richard had needlessly suffered.

He almost snatched the bundle from her hands. "They are not my handwriting. By Heaven! Marshall, I shall make someone at the hospital pay for this!" With fingers which now, instead of trembling with joy, shook with fury, he opened one of the envelopes and pulled from it a letter.

He read it through. Then, without a word, he passed it to Marshall. The letter was from a father to the doctor in charge of the hospital, overjoyed at the news that his daughter was pulling round, and bitterly regretting that he was not in a position to cross the Channel and see her. Neither had he the money, he explained, nor the time, for his position in the City of London was exacting. Yet he prayed them to do their best, and send his daughter home as soon as she was fit to travel. It was signed Joseph Fearall.

Marshall puzzled over the letter, but slowly he began to deduce a possible solution.

"Tell me, Mrs. Verrell, what did they call you at the hospital?"

She smiled faintly. "What should they call me? Madame Verrell?"

"Madame or mademoiselle?"

She looked at him, a puzzled frown creasing her forehead. "It is strange that you should say that. At first they kept calling me Mademoiselle Verrell, until I told them that I was married, and pointed to my wedding-ring."

"What of your luggage?"

"It was all burned; these clothes belong to my nurse. I wanted to surprise father, so I did not write to him for the money."

"Who was in your carriage when the accident occurred?"

She coloured faintly. "I scarcely noticed. I—I was too happy."

"Please try to remember, Mrs. Verrell. Was there a woman?"

She thought for perhaps half a minute. "Yes," she said suddenly. "I remember now. There was one. Perhaps five or six years older than I, I should say. I recollect that she was dressed very soberly."

"And you say positively all your luggage was burned! What happened to yourself?"

"I knew nothing. One minute I was in the train: then a blank. The next I knew I was in hospital after three weeks' unconsciousness. As soon as I was well I asked after my father. I was informed that he had been told, and had written to say that he was delighted at my recovery, that he sent his love, but would be unable to cross.

"Then I asked after my husband." Her voice rose to a higher pitch. "Father, dear, they kept putting me off until at last I insisted on a reply. They told me that I must be delirious, that they could prove

I was not married." She blushed. "Then I told them I—I was on my honeymoon, and insisted that they wired. I began to be ill again with anxiety, till at last they told me that Richard was quite well but unable to come to me because he was in another hospital, but that he was getting along quite well."

She clutched her father's arm in a fierce grip. With a voice bordering on hysteria she continued: "He is all right, father; tell me that he is alive and well?"

Marshall saw Sir Allen glance at him. Quickly he interposed. "Mrs. Verrell, your husband is as well as your father or myself." With the knowledge that he spoke nothing less than the truth there was the ring of conviction in every word he uttered, and Bobbie relapsed with a little sigh of relief.

Then she seemed to remember. "Oh, heavens! Then he, too, thought me dead. Oh, poor, poor Richard!"

She buried her face in her hands, and Marshall observed that her body shook slightly with the sobs which welled up from her heart; but there was something still which he wished to discover, and after a minute or two he broke the silence which had settled down between them.

"You must pardon me, Mrs. Verrell, but won't you tell me, please—how were the hospital authorities presumably able to write to your father before you recovered consciousness?"

She dried her tears and smiled at him. "There, I am a big, stupid baby; but it does seem awful to think what my poor husband must have suffered. But there, that is not answering your question, Mr. Marshall. They told me they found a charred visiting-card just by my body."

"What were your injuries?"

"Something fell on my head. It is still tender. Fancy, for three whole weeks I remained unconscious!"

Marshall sighed. "I think I understand now, Mrs. Verrell. When you were found with a card near by, they believed it belonged to you. It did not. It was the property of a Miss Fearall—pronounced by a Frenchman or a Frenchwoman, do you not think it would sound very similar to your new name? You had no luggage to prove to the contrary, and finally you answered to the title. Mrs. Verrell, don't you see? While poor Sir Allen thought you were dead, someone in London—in Barking to be precise—believed his daughter, the girl who was actually discovered with your ring in her hand, to be still alive, so that it was you whom the world believed to be dead. Your identities became mixed, and now—the happiness gained by your father will be counterbalanced by the grief of another father when he hears the truth."

The silence which followed lasted until they arrived at Maybrick Avenue. It was not until they were inside that Bobbie realized that it was to her father's house that she had been taken.

She turned to Sir Allen in surprise. "Father dear, why have you brought me here? I thought we were going to my new apartment, Richard's apartment. Where is Richard? Why has he not come to meet me?"

Sir Allen sighed; but when he looked at her flushed face, he knew that he ought not to delay explanations any longer, for however hard the blow, it would not fall easier for procrastination.

"Make yourself comfortable, my dear. Why isn't Richard here? Well, you see, Bobbie, since the accident—Richard has not been quite the same—in fact—in fact—to tell the truth, I have not seen him since—since the day you two were married."

The fatal news was out. No one moved or spoke for awhile. Bobbie just stared at her father with incredulous eyes.

Presently her lips moved. "Not seen him—but—oh, daddie! Daddie! You mean he—he, too, is—dead?" Her gasping words finished with an unconcealed sobbing cry.

He swallowed hard. "Gracious, no! He had a nasty blow on the head, like you, my dear; but the French doctors shipped him back home again, safe and sound. Since then he—he has—disappeared."

"Disappeared!" Her already flushed cheeks reddened ominously. "And you have not had a search made for him high and low, you—his father-in-law?" She gazed at him with an accusing air, and Sir Allen wriggled uncomfortably.

"Bobbie dear, Marshall here has been at work; he and his men have been searching for weeks without success."

Bobbie turned to Marshall with a reproachful look which pained him. "And you told me he was as well as my father or yourself!"

"I—I told you that because—because I am certain that it is the truth," he stuttered.

Bobbie turned her glance from one to the other. In Marshall's attitude of confusion she read despair; from her father's hesitant manner she deduced the worst. She buried her face in her hands. Such was her homecoming!

Awkwardly the two men stood by, manlike, utterly at a loss what to do, until Sir Allen signalled with his head, and almost on tiptoe they crossed to the other side of the room, leaving Bobbie alone in her sorrow.

Knowing that she was suffering needless pain, Marshall cursed to himself that she could not tell her the real truth; but not only was that impossible while Sir Allen was about, but he was hopeful to find Blackshirt before Bobbie should discover his relapse. The detective was confident that once Verrell knew his wife was alive—well, he would not be the man Marshall

thought him to be if his outlook on life didn't as rapidly change again.

Alas for his hopes of keeping the news from Bobbie! Fools step in where angels fear to tread, and blunderingly, anxious only to put his daughter more at ease, Sir Allen commenced a fatal conversation.

"One of your old friends turned up again in the news, I see, Marshall."

Unsuspecting where it was to lead, Marshall blithely fell into the trap, realizing only Sir Allen's object.

"Whom do you mean, Sir Allen?" he asked.

"A man with whom we are all, more or less, acquainted; the man who seemed to drop entirely out of the attentions of the newspapers for quite a long time, only to reappear with a dramatic flourish." He stopped, evidently under the impression that Marshall knew to whom he referred.

"You mean?" prompted Marshall, who, covertly watching Bobbie, was, in reality, thinking of anything else but of what the baronet was saying.

"Who else but—Blackshirt!"

"Of course!" answered the detective mechanically. Meanwhile he saw the effect of Sir Allen's words on Bobbie. Of a sudden her head jerked up with the air of a startled, hunted stag, and Marshall's keener ears caught the sound of a gasp.

For a few moments he could see that it was almost as if her saddened brain refused to credit the meaning of her father's words; but as the realization of them soaked into her consciousness, her face was flooded with a sublime blissfulness.

All of a sudden she sensed the significance of Marshall's words, and she rapidly glanced in his direction, and seeing that he was watching, flashed him a mute look of imploring appeal, to which he replied with the faintest of nods.

As though he were reading a book Marshall under-

stood from her facial expressions just what passed across her mind, for slowly the overpowering joy died away, to be succeeded by one of pain. Her forehead creased, and her lips quivered suspiciously.

Then it seemed that she recollected that until this moment the world thought her dead, and therefore so did Blackshirt, her husband, and again her lips twitched; but this time the look in her eyes was one of intense pity. Like Marshall, she could realize all that Verrell had felt, and like the detective, sympathized to an extent with his sentiments.

No wonder he had reverted to what he was in that time before she had first met him! What a cruel stroke of fate it must have seemed to him when he heard that Bobbie was dead! So well could she understand, for what had been her own thoughts during the few seconds she had believed Richard dead—and now that she knew otherwise she dared not let her mind dwell thereon for shame.

She longed to speak to Marshall, and she searched around in her mind for an excuse to dispose of her father for a short period. Meanwhile Sir Allen and the detective were discussing Blackshirt, and prompted and steered by the astute Marshall, the conversation related to her the history of the revivified Blackshirt.

She learned of his letter to the *Evening Star*, of his audacious daring, and of his incredible theft of Mrs. Pendelbury's pearls from under the eyes of hundreds of people, of his inconceivable cunning in openly exhibiting the pearls round his neck, where, among so many, the stolen string passed unnoticed; and finally, of his disappearance, and of the total lack of theories as to how he had performed this last miracle.

Her heart sang. To her who had shared in some of the nocturnal adventures of his pre-Benedict days, the story was more than thrilling. His cool intrepidity

was so reminiscent of the Blackshirt she knew, of the Blackshirt she loved.

Only when Sir Allen, led to believe that Marshall had not read the *Evening Star*, went on to relate of Blackshirt's boasts, of his defiance of the police, of his contempt for the Press, did fear begin to clutch at her heart. The egotism of Blackshirt's challenge was not of the old Blackshirt. The letters to the *Evening Star* were foolish, and like Marshall she believed they could only lead to one end. Sooner or later Blackshirt would be captured, and then——

"Father dear," she interrupted, "I think I would like to go to bed. Would you see that my old room is made ready?"

Scarcely were the words uttered than he was gone, and Bobbie turned toward the detective.

"Oh, Mr. Marshall, you must find him, you must! What can have come over him? I do not understand, and I am afraid. Won't you please, please do your best?" She stretched out her hands, and with an almost apologetic air he took them within his own big, hairy paws.

"Not only for your sake, Mrs. Verrell, but for his. Yet if Blackshirt is not the same Blackshirt that we both know, he is infinitely more cunning. I have hunted for him in vain. He has disappeared as mysteriously as he did from Lady Kingston's ballroom. One thing will bring him to you. Let the Press know of your return to London. He will read that his wife is alive and well instead of, as he thinks, dead, and—why, in two wags of a dog's tail he will be by your side, Mrs. Verrell, and for the second time Blackshirt will disappear."

"I will do that this afternoon," she said, her eyes shining in anticipation.

Sir Allen, returning to the room just then to usher her quietly to bed, could not understand why his

daughter suddenly changed her mind and decided to visit Fleet Street instead.

* * * * *

"What do you think of our new lodger, Nellie? Such a nice young man he seems, so quiet and studious." Mrs. Jones looked at her daughter out of the corner of her eye. Nellie was not exactly as young as she had been two or three years ago, as Mrs. Jones was so fond of instilling into her, and her looks—well, if she wanted a husband, she would have to hurry up and find one quickly, and that was all she had to say!

Nellie blushed. "Yes, mother. He is such a gentleman, and so different to all the young men I know in Wandsworth."

"I am glad you think think so," said her mother significantly. "I don't want to speak too plain, Nellie, but you know how much your father wants to sell out his grocery business and retire to a nice little cottage at the seaside; and so do I, for that matter. Only before we do that we want to give you a splash wedding."

"Yes, mother; I know."

"That's a good job. What is Mr. Thomson's Christian name, by the way?"

"I—I don't know, mother."

"You don't know!" Mrs. Jones gazed at her daughter in disgust. "Then all I can say is, you let me take up his letters and post cards to him in future."

"But he hasn't had any so far, mother."

"Oh!" For a few seconds her mother was silenced. "Anyhow, don't forget what I have just told you about me and your dad."

"No, mother," replied Nellie dutifully.

In the meantime the subject of Mrs. Jones's conversation with her daughter was busily reading a newspaper

in the small front bedroom on the first floor just above their heads.

Quiet and studious he might have looked to Mrs. Jones at most times, but at the moment his brow was lined with puzzlement, while his eyes glittered angrily. There were two paragraphs side by side which occupied his attention, and the compositor of the *Evening Star* little knew the significance between the two.

The first heralded the return of Mrs. Richard Verrell, wife of the famous novelist; and Verrell, now known as Mr. Thomson, of Wandsworth, wondered which of two people were mad, he or the editor of the newspaper.

"Mrs. Richard Verrell, wife of the famous novelist!" He laughed shortly. "Of what are they talking? Since when have I been married?" So ran his thoughts as he read the story of Bobbie's return to life.

Of the events recounted in the newspaper he could remember nothing except the train wreck; and a shudder of horror convulsed him. Could he ever forget it? He groaned to himself as in a misty vision he saw once again the flaring carriages, the burned bodies, heard the shrieks of the dying. Yet always there was that mist before his eyes, a mysterious veil which seemed to lift sufficiently for him to remember only that one terrible scene. Otherwise he knew nothing—neither why he was in France at all, nor the events which had led up to that time.

Only now and again was he receptive to sudden flashes of memory. For instance, when he thought of the burning coaches he could also faintly recollect another fire when, a child in his arms, he had had to charge through billowing clouds of smoke and licking, burning flames. Also the subsequent events: the shriek of the maid on the top floor, cut off from safety; his own dash up again through the flames; that ghastly nightmare when he had, inch by inch, lowered himself and the maid down the drainpipe; the crowds calling

"Blackshirt"; the advancing policemen; the fall through the skylight; the shooting pain in his leg—and then blankness.

There was just one other thing he remembered, and that still more hazily—McTavish mockingly denouncing Richard Verrell as Blackshirt. That was all. What had happened afterward he could not think; when he endeavoured his head ached so abominably that he had to cease.

It was because of this retrospective picture of McTavish that, without a word to anyone, he left his bachelor lodgings at Notting Hill, and the tender care of Roberts, his valet, and fled to Wandsworth, where one day he had seen in a front window of the residence of Mrs. Jones, "Lodger required."

Because the room which he would occupy was one at the angle of two roads, and, at the same time, overlooking a front and a back garden, directly he inspected it he became the required lodger, and at the same time a prospective suitor for Nellie—at any rate, in the opinion of his new landlady.

So it was that he failed to understand the reference in the newspaper to Mrs. Richard Verrell. There was no Mrs. Verrell, and slowly he reached the conclusion that in her newly created identity was laid for him a clumsy, obvious trap, set, perhaps, by Scotland Yard or by the amateur newspaper sleuth, Hepplewhaite.

He read on, and his eyes narrowed. The following page contained a photograph of Mrs. Verrell. As he studied it he became assured in his own mind that it was dimly reminiscent—the expression of the eyes, the mischievous twist of the bewitching and inviting lips, the rebellious hair. She had a beautiful face, not even besmirched by the crudity of the reproduction, and his eyes dwelt rather hungrily upon the print-surrounded photograph.

The mood passed quickly. The very fact that the

so-called Mrs. Verrell was vaguely familiar to him was evidence that the plot was less amateurish, a trifle more devilish. Such an adorable person was almost sufficient to tempt him to claim her in very truth. He smiled grimly. He would beware of "Mrs. Verrell" if he should ever meet her.

He turned back to the front page again and read the adjoining column. As he did so his eyes lit with a gleam of amusement. Four days hence, he learned, Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot would hold in the grounds of her charming mansion, Blackwater House, on the London Road to Colchester, the first big garden fête of the season. All Society was to be there, and as Blackshirt read down the list of the names he whistled appreciatively. Surely there would be a good haul for his nimble fingers!

* * * * *

ANOTHER LETTER FROM BLACKSHIRT

Such were the placards which plastered the exterior of every newsagent's shop throughout London and most of the big provincial cities, and the public, who had long been wondering what would be the next move on the part of the audacious criminal, bought the early noon edition of the *Evening Star* with avidity.

SIR (so ran the message),

I have read with interest the announcement in the current issue of your journal of the garden fête which Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot is holding three days hence.

Although I have not yet had the pleasure of receiving an invitation from such a worthy hostess, you may assure Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot and her guests that I shall be there.

BLACKSHIRT.

Despite the heavily increased printing order which the chief had given directly he received the letter from Blackshirt, within three hours of the appearance of the noon edition there was not a copy of the *Evening Star* to be bought for love or money, and many had to await the five o'clock edition to assuage their anxiety for knowledge of Blackshirt's newest challenge.

In the offices of the newspaper there was held a consultation. There were present the All-Highest himself and the chief, while Hepplewhaite was expected shortly. It was not often that Sir John Ballintyre made a descent upon the editorial offices, other than to examine the circulation figures, being content to leave the management of the staff in the able hands of the chief; but for once he made an exception.

"Y'know, Sanders, this Blackshirt fellow is proving the biggest scoop in the history of the *Evening Star*. We used to say, 'We lead, others follow,' but there is no question of following. We have the public tied up hand and foot, it seems to me." He smiled with a satisfied smirk. "I would give a 'fiver' to know what the return figures will be to-day of the other evening papers, and, for that matter, some of the 'dailies,' for the next few days."

The chief laughed in sympathy. "Well on the wrong side, Sir John, unless I am much mistaken. Ah, here is Hepplewhaite. He is just in from interviewing Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot."

Hepplewhaite came in, his face alight with triumph. Seeing the All-Highest, he sobered down; but Sir John waved him into a chair and eyed the younger man with a benign air.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Hepplewhaite. Mr. Sanders has been telling me of the more than useful work you have been putting in for the *Evening Star* lately. You may be interested to know that the Board will not forget your interests, and before long it is more than

possible you will have some good news, particularly "—he paused—"particularly, I say, if you are successful in having a hand in the capture of this Blackshirt."

Hepplewhaite flashed a look of gratitude toward his chief. "I am doing my best," he agreed modestly.

"Good man! You should have far to go. Now, in the meantime, I want to talk to you about this man Blackshirt. I hear you have been down to see Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot?"

"Yes, Sir John. She is, if I may say so, in a blue funk. So much so that she has left everything unconditionally in our hands. We are to make all arrangements with regard to safeguarding her guests, and for that purpose she is willing to give us the run of the house and the surrounding gardens."

Sir John raised his forehead. "You must have a persuasive tongue, young man." Then he looked toward the chief. "I think we can do worse than leave everything in the hands of Mr. Hepplewhaite. What do you say, Sanders?"

"Undoubtedly, sir," agreed the chief promptly. Sir John did not like arguments, and it was always safer to concur with all his remarks.

"Very good! Then that is understood, Mr. Hepplewhaite. Have you any ideas as yet?"

"Several, Sir John," said Hepplewhaite enthusiastically. "If I may, sir, I will tell you something of Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot's place itself." And, without waiting for assent, he continued: "First of all, I ought to explain that the house, one of those *nouveau riche* semi-palaces, sir, all big rooms, bathrooms, and hundreds of electric lights, seems to me to have been built for one purpose only—that of sheltering guests of the house-party variety. If Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot ever wishes to sell out it will make an ideal hotel. That, however, is *en passant*, and merely that you should visualize it and realize that the possibility of Blackshirt

hiding within the house itself would be comparatively negligible.

"The grounds are quite different. Except in the immediate vicinity of the house, which is laid out as spacious lawns, it is mostly wooded, which, to be perfectly frank, should give Blackshirt every opportunity of concealing himself. Therefore I shall concentrate, firstly, on seeing that no one gets into the grounds without an invitation ticket—and Blackshirt says he has not received one; and, secondly, giving him the benefit of the doubt, preventing his escape should he successfully pull off a coup.

"The estate itself is entirely enclosed by a six-foot-high wire fence, in which there are three entrances, one of which sweeps in a long carriage drive up from the London Road to the main entrance of the house, another which leads off from a side road up to a side entrance, used by tradespeople, and finally a third one which opens out on to a narrow footpath which runs down to the river.

"At each of these entrances at least one policeman will be stationed, and also, if you agree, Sir John, one of our own men, especially 'Pharaoh' of the Society column. He knows everyone; if there is a stranger to Society he will instantly recognize him.

"I have thoroughly toured this wire fence from end to end, and I have discovered that by placing seven men at certain intervals, at places I have marked down, there is not an inch of the fence which would not be under the observation of at least one, and in most cases two, of the guards.

"You will see, therefore, Sir John, that it is apparently impossible for Blackshirt to secure admittance into the grounds without an invitation card, or, in the event of his endeavouring to get in secretly, without being seen by one of the guards—whom Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot is willing to engage for the day and night.

"This possibility can be negatived by each of the seven guards being supplied with two miniature searchlights, which will be so placed that their rays of light fall parallel to the wire fence, one pointing each way toward the next guard. These, together with sufficient light at each of the three entrances, will create a veritable ring of light round the complete estate, through which not even Blackshirt should be able to pass.

"These guards, with their means of illumination, should be just as effective in barring Blackshirt's exit as they should his entrance, so, even assuming that he does get in, he will find it still more difficult to get out, for no one, whosoever they may be, will be allowed to pass out without a minute inspection of their identity."

"Bravo!" said Sir John. "You ought to have been a field-marshal, not a journalist, Mr. Hepplewhaite. Tell me, how does Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot think her guests will appreciate these almost military preparations?"

Hepplewhaite smiled confidently. "She was extremely dubious at first, and utterly against the guests being subjected to such humiliation, but even while I was with her she had three telephone messages from different people whom she had invited, and all said they were thoroughly thrilled, and anticipating the capture of Blackshirt with delight."

Sir John laughed. "Well, well! It would not be my idea of pleasure, but I suppose young people will be young people. By the way, Mr. Hepplewhaite, you might look out for my wife. Lady Ballintyre will be pleased to see you, and if necessary give you any assistance within her power.

"In the meantime, your plans interest me. You may draw on the exchequer of the *Evening Star* as much as is necessary—put it down to the publicity account. I think it will be worth it, don't you,

Sanders? And just one more thing—do all you can to capture this impudent blackguard, but if you don't, remember this—we shall not criticize. Blackshirt's doing us a good turn, and for a little while it will not hurt if he keeps it up. The best idea of all would be to have your tactics keep him out. Perhaps people might fall into the habit of asking the *Evening Star* to protect their interests."

"Don't you fear, Sir John. Blackshirt won't succeed this time," Hepplewhaite boasted, and laughed contentedly.

* * * * *

Among the first to arrive at Blackwater House were Sir Allen Dunn, Bobbie, and Marshall. Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot had hastened to send a card of invitation along to Bobbie almost as soon as she read of Mrs. Verrell's unexpected return to life, and Bobbie, reading Blackshirt's challenge, swallowed her pride and accepted.

There was no admittance for Marshall. "I am very sorry, Sir Allen, but I have the strictest injunctions from Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot to admit no one who does not present an invitation card. I cannot do it, even for you, Sir Allen."

Sir Allen bit his lip and might have retorted angrily, but Bobbie restrained him.

"Send Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot a little note, father dear. I am sure she will be only too glad to have Mr. Marshall attend. He will make another to add to her army of protectors."

Sir Allen growled. "Ridiculous rubbish! It is almost like a military camp. All the same, I do not see why Marshall should wish to be in at the death. From all I have heard about him this Blackshirt chap isn't such a bad fellow. Mainly a good man gone wrong, I should say."

Bobbie smiled sadly. "Perhaps, father dear. I am

sure Mr. Marshall has his own reasons, and I am just as certain that they are very good ones too."

Sir Allen's face cleared. "You are right there, Bobbie. I will write at once."

It was not long before an answer came back from their hostess, who was more than pleased to have Mr. Marshall join the party.

"My dear, oh, my dear! I think it is too wonderful! To think all of us thought you were dead, that we should never see you again!" So gushed Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot, and Bobbie smiled back again, concealing her dislike for the woman who was tolerated by Society only because of her charming husband.

She tried to get away, but Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot had not yet finished. "Where is your dear husband? I have just read his latest book. I think it is too wonderful for words." She looked around. "Don't say you have left him behind, my dear Mrs. Verrell?"

Bobbie looked away. "My husband is recuperating after the accident. The doctor ordered him away to Switzerland for awhile."

There was a gleam in the eyes of the other woman. "And he left you behind, my dear?" In her memory she noted down the interesting information of the newly married couple who so soon spent their convalescence in different countries.

Bobbie did not miss the expression. "The same doctor would not allow me to go," she replied coldly. "He said the high altitude would make my head bad again."

"Of course, of course. Poor, dear Mrs. Verrell!"

Next to the hostess stood her husband. He took Bobbie's hand, and pressed it softly within his own. "I am glad things are—as they are," he said, and somehow his unobtrusive congratulations, so sincere in comparison with the flamboyant rhapsodies of his wife, touched a responsive chord in Bobbie's breast, and a

tiny tear welled into the corner of her eye. If he knew the truth, would he still be pleased that things were—as they were?

For some time Bobbie was unable to escape the attentions of the few people who were already at the fête. She was the lion of the day, and from all quarters she received expressions of felicitation. At last, however, she was permitted a respite, and she signalled Marshall, who was hovering near, and together they wandered off.

"Do you really think he will come, Mr. Marshall?"

"I am afraid so," the detective replied, "but God knows how he is going to get in. I don't see how he will be able to."

"I pray he will get in safely," said Bobbie softly, "and that we shall meet. Then all will be well. When he knows I am still alive he will forget that he is Blackshirt, and I shall hold my beloved husband in my arms again."

Marshall grunted dismally. "Yet all the same, Mrs. Verrell, I feel nervous. If by any chance he should bring off a coup before he meets you the damage will be done. Names will be checked, your husband, whom you have just reported to be in Switzerland, will be discovered, and even if nothing is proved, there will be suspicions, insinuations."

She moaned. "Please, please, Mr. Marshall! I cannot bear even the thought of it. I can only pray for the best."

"There, there, Mrs. Verrell," he soothed. "As usual, I was looking at the darkest side of the cloud. As a matter of fact, I still think that we shall not see Blackshirt to-night. With all the preparations which have been made—well!" He shrugged his shoulders. "It just isn't possible."

* * * * *

The Clerk of the Weather had treated Mrs. ffoulkes-

Herriot in a more than affable manner. As though it were a special mark of favour to the delighted hostess, the sky had lately been flooded with a glorious sunset; streaks of bright, golden yellow, set off by deep borders of velvety orange, had vied in sheer artistry with the patches of gorgeous purple fringed by paling blue.

Soon afterward the misty dusk began to gather, and the soft shadow of twilight covered the countryside; from the depths of the near-by woods came the song of the nightingale.

Music was in the air, and its infectious melody entered into the heart of the tall, athletic figure who briskly stepped along the two miles of rutted road which led from the nearest station to Blackwater House.

Verrell walked with a swinging gait which, carrying him along at a steady pace, was timed by the tune of the marching song which he hummed softly to himself.

He was dressed in evening clothes; a gibus hat covered his head, a silken scarf protected his neck, and an immaculately cut evening coat fell in perfect lines from his broad shoulders.

If the *tout ensemble* failed effectively to conceal his splendid physique, it was more than sufficient to cover up the black shirt which he had on under the overcoat, and still more the thin, narrow belt buckled around his waist next his skin, in which methodically reposed small, compact instruments of the finest material and workmanship, the tools of his trade, capable, with the assistance of his dexterous, sensitive fingers, of securing him admittance past bolts and bars of the most intricate patterns.

Only the ultra-modern safes were strong enough to withstand his assaults, such as those of the type which, made in one piece, in the shape of a huge metal ball, revolve continually and defy even foot- or hand-hold on the smooth, rounded exterior.

As he blithely swung on toward his destination, Blackshirt's thoughts did not dwell upon the difficulties and the dangers of the self-appointed task before him. Rather was he conscious of the beauty of the early, summer evening, with its romance, its message of more spiritual matters.

His nerves thrilled, and his blood seethed with Nature's electricity. He felt absurdly blissful, but merely laughed contentedly when he realized such was the case. It was the call of life, the song of love, and, though he knew it not, he was listening to it.

So he kept on his way until, as he rounded a corner, the beauty of the night was destroyed by the debasing influence of civilization. Before him was Blackwater House, and, with a sudden, tingling warning, he realized that dreams must be banished; he must prepare for action.

Carefully noting where he was, he stripped off his coat and his hat and unwrapped his white silk scarf. These he placed together in a small bundle which he hid beneath the foot of a tree.

From his belt he pulled a black silk mask. He had made it himself, and when it was adjusted it covered his face from forehead to chin. Next he pulled on his hands a pair of black silk gloves, over the tops of which he buttoned the ends of his sleeves, and so, black now from top to toe, he merged into the darkness, and even two yards from him one would not have realized that he was anything but part of the night.

All ready he surveyed the scene in front of him, and beneath his mask his lips smiled cynically.

Blackwater House was a blaze of light. Hepplewhaite had done his work well. There was not an inch of the wire fence which was not under the glare of the limelights set at several intervals. In addition the woods and grounds themselves were turned into an

enchanted land of coloured lights—Chinese lanterns and, where the electricity did not reach, fairy lamps.

In the centre was more light, where large arc-lamps spread a harsh, white glare upon lawns and dancing couples, while in Blackwater House itself every window was ablaze.

There, also, was music, but of a different kind, music which, after the soft, siren chants of the birds and the insects of the woods, was harsh, blaring, and untuneful, though it was rhythmic and satisfactory to the dancers.

There were many people to be seen, and each moment more were arriving, mostly by automobile. All this Blackshirt saw from the shadows of the wood in which he was, and one by one he turned over in his mind plans for obtaining an entrance, but as quickly as they occurred to him so he had to discard them. The circle of light was a stroke of genius, and Blackshirt was more than ready to acknowledge the fact. Yet, that he might rest satisfied before going farther, that there was not one single loophole, he toured the exterior of the Blackwater House estate, and at the same time memorized the geography and topography of the grounds.

He came to the tradesmen's entrance, but here he saw the guard was even more strict than at the main entrance, and he passed on until he arrived at the side gate which led to the river. He laughed softly to himself when he observed it. Not yet was Hepplewhaite cunning enough to realize that Blackshirt would choose the least obvious mode of entry, of which the side entrance was certainly not the one, and here Hepplewhaite had set the strongest guard.

In the end Blackshirt arrived back to where he started, convinced that there was only one way into the grounds, and that by the main entrance. But how? He frowned slightly as he puzzled over the situation.

Then suddenly he laughed aloud. At last his fertile

imagination had conceived a germ of a suggestion, a daring, risky proposal, and yet well worth the attempt. For a quarter of an hour he waited and watched, carefully noting in his mind the procedure of the policemen and the several other men round the main gates; the curve of the motor-drive up to the mansion; the returning motor-cars—and at the end of that time was prepared to risk all on one throw of the dice.

Carefully he threaded his way to the London road again. Already he had crossed it twice in his circular tour of the estate, but he had been careful to make it at a distance, far from the visibility of the guards, who were blinded by their own light.

There was no one about for the moment, no cars approaching. Doubling up, he flitted across the road and sank into the parallel ditch, luckily both deep and dry, and here he wormed his way into a clump of thick grass and was more hidden than ever.

For yet another quarter of an hour he bided his time. Then, all at once, he believed the chance for which he was waiting had arrived. There was a line of motor-cars waiting to enter the Blackwater estate, for at the gates each one was stopped for identification purposes.

There were four cars behind the magnificent Rolls-Royce, the property of Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot's sister, who was even then indignantly arguing over the necessity of producing her invitation card, and the last one which had just driven up was a modest, plebeian Ford, driven by the local taxi-driver; the ideal car for Blackshirt's plan.

No other automobiles were coming, no other cars with their revealing, penetrating headlights, and Blackshirt made up his mind. Like a noiseless phantom he slipped from the ditch, and bending almost double, he ran lithely toward the back of the Ford. With a quick movement he slipped underneath its high body, and inserting his toes well into the back springs,

slipped his arms round the main shaft, and there he hung, only hoping that no other cars would tail up behind.

Luck was with him. The Ford moved on, yard by yard, until Blackshirt heard a polite voice inquiring for the card of entry. It was produced, evidently the inspection was satisfactory, for with a polished "Thank you, madame," the square slip of gilt-edged cardboard was handed back, and the car moved forward along the curved carriage-drive.

Blackshirt counted the trees and braced himself up for action. The thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth—then he dropped, letting his heels fall before he released his arms.

The bump of his fall, despite its infinitesimal distance, for the reason of his rigidity and because he fell flat on his back, left him gasping for breath and a trifle sick, a feeling not improved by the smother of the exhaust; but he knew there was no time to waste, and, rising a trifle dizzily to his feet, he crossed quickly into the friendly cover of the trees.

He let a minute pass while he recovered—then chuckled to himself in triumph. So much for all Hepplewhaite's boasted precautions previously heralded in the *Evening Star!* Was he not within the grounds of Blackwater House? Was there not an ample reward for his daring to be garnered in by his nimble fingers? —and his heart sang for the adventure of it!

* * * * *

The fête was proving itself a huge success, and Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot basked and smirked in the sunshine of her own estimation.

Perhaps the environment was responsible, perhaps it was the balmy evening; perhaps it was the bright new crescent moon, the twinkling stars! Whatever it was, there was not one there who did not feel the urge of

excitement, the thrill of adventure, and so, immersed in their own pleasures, Blackshirt became forgotten by all but a few, by Bobbie and Marshall, and Hepplewhaite and his guards.

The moon dropped lower, the orchestra waxed merrier—then from the roof of Blackwater House a sizzling stream of coloured rain sped into the heavens, where, with a distant pop, it burst into a mass of golden globules.

"Blackshirt!"

That was the signal! Blackshirt had brought off his coup!

Over the whole of the estate there descended a dead silence broken only by the barking of a disturbed dog. Then the chase began. Dancing was forgotten, games abandoned, refreshments suspended. Quickly the whisper ran around: "Blackshirt must be caught"; and with elated spirits, worked up to fever pitch by the long day of excitement and amusement, the younger guests joined Hepplewhaite's hounds, and the pack streamed into the house to search for the daring criminal who had "lifted" a diamond and platinum ring from the finger of a jewelled guest as she wandered through the passages of Blackwater House.

In the woods a dark shadow flitted to and fro, seeing but unseen, lips curved with laughter, eyes alight with amusement.

Blackshirt was all prepared. A minute or two more and he would escape, but just until then he would watch the fun.

He made for the carriage-drive where the trees were darker, less illuminated. There he was almost invisible; and with the irresponsible feeling of a schoolboy, he could scarcely resist a "Tally-ho!" for the hunt that was up for him. As it was his lips parted, and once again that evening he laughed aloud, an outlet of an irresistible gaiety—and Bobbie, who knew the habits of

Blackshirt, and who had made for the darkest part of the estate, heard him, and her heart leaped.

"Richard!" Her whisper floated through the quiet air. "Richard darling, it is I who call you, I, Bobbie. I am alive; I am near you. Come to me, dear."

The pack streamed out of the house, splitting up into groups. Soon some of them would approach——

He could see her just near him, her white dress standing out startlingly before the sombre background. She was a spirit from another world, a dainty fairy who was appealing to him. . . .

The magic of the night which had got into his blood made him reckless. He stepped up close to her. "I am here—who are you?"

The pack was getting nearer. Bobbie felt him near. Instinctively her hands shot out and grasped him frantically. "Richard!" she said, and there were a thousand unshed tears in her voice. He did not know her!—it seemed to her then that her heart was breaking. "Richard! Oh, my dear! It is I; Bobbie—your wife!"

Instantly he was deadly cold, his warm blood chilling at her words. He remembered the newspapers, the paragraphs with reference to her return, and to himself. This was the trap he had feared.

"Interesting, but—I am not married." His words were bitterly scornful, and Bobbie's grip tightened. She wanted to faint, the world was spinning, twisting—but Blackshirt saw only that she would hold him until the pack arrived, and now they were near—very near.

With a rough gesture he shook her off, and free of her, his heart bubbled up again, and this time he could not resist the temptation. He lifted his voice so that the echo of it travelled through the trees to where the guards were keyed up expectantly.

"Tally-ho! Tally-ho! Catch me—if you can!" he called. Even if the pack did not see him they heard

him, and rushed blindly in the direction of his voice. Then Blackshirt turned and ran.

He came within the vision of the limelights. The guards saw him. With a bellow of anger they braced themselves up to meet his attack, for they saw he was running toward them, his black-clothed figure just a black blob in the glaring light.

He was nearly to them, a yard more and he would be in their grasp; but the next moment, to the amazement of the pack who followed and the guards who waited, Blackshirt rose into the air, clinging to the end of an eight-foot pole.

High into the air he vaulted, over the heads of the men, over the tall wire fence, and then he landed safely just on the fringe of the light.

With a wave of the hand he started off, and the next moment there was no sight of him, for he was lost in the dark, and as the mocking echo of Blackshirt's laughter floated back to the guests of the fête, there was an hilarious roar of amusement from the younger members as they knew that Blackshirt had won again.

* * * * *

Wise old Marshall, who had seen so much of the world, guessed the truth.

"Don't you see, Mrs. Verrell—the accident—he has lost his memory."

For a moment Bobbie's eyes clouded over with tears which welled up into them; but these she banished, and the next moment they sparkled with a sudden gleam of divine joy.

"Then," she announced breathlessly, "there is work for me to do."

The detective looked at her in puzzlement.

"Don't you see?" she explained. "All that I have done once I must do again."

"You mean——?"

"I mean that once again I will make him love me, and once again I will make his love regenerate him."

And Marshall, gazing at the firm expression of her lips, at the beauty of her face, believed that if once he could but trace out Blackshirt's new address, she could do nothing else but succeed.

He sighed, too. As a bachelor he must have lost a lot in life, he thought.

An air of gloom pervaded the editorial offices of the *Evening Star*. Someone was "in for it," and Hepplewhaite, as he awaited the inevitable summons, trembled in his shoes.

It was not long in coming. "Sir John wants you, please, Mr. Hepplewhaite, in the chief's room." Then, having faithfully delivered his message, the boy continued: "Gee! Mr. Hepplewhaite, I am sorry, straight I am. The All-Highest looks like the morning after the night before. He nearly swallowed me up 'cause I was about two wags of a dog's tail before I answered the bell." There was an unmistakable note of sympathy in the boy's voice.

Hepplewhaite groaned. "All right, Johnny. You are one nice, little comforter, you are." He rose to his feet and made his way to the chief's office, not without experiencing a twinge of bitterness. There was Eileen at home; they had been married very little over a year, and in a few months' time, all being well, there would be an addition to the *menage*. If anything should happen to him—there were better writers than he who had walked "The Street" for months without success! Worthwhile positions were few and far between, and applications for them many.

There was an atmosphere of uneasiness brooding in the chief's room, and Hepplewhaite was immediately conscious of it the moment he set foot inside. The chief himself sat glumly at his handsome table, his face set. Sir John paced up and down, his countenance red, his brow scowling.

"Well!" The All-Highest barked the word. "Sit

down, Hepplewhaite. Don't stand there fidgeting. Now, sir, let us hear what you have to say about last night. I have a faint idea that I heard you say a day or so ago that you could not fail to catch Blackshirt," he continued, with heavy sarcasm.

"I am sorry, Sir John," Hepplewhaite said nervously, "I did my best and—and, after all, Sir John, it was a scoop for the *Evening Star*. Even the other papers have given us publicity."

It was an unfortunate remark. "Publicity be damned, Hepplewhaite! All of the wrong sort. There is not one newspaper which has not made sport of us: of me, in particular. Look at this—and at this——" He picked up two or three newspapers from the chief's table. "Look—that beastly caricature is supposed to be *me*. Gad! man, it isn't we who have scooped, but the *International* and all the rest of 'em. Look at their headlines! 'Blackshirt defies the *Evening Star*.' 'Steals Diamond Pendant from Lady Ballintyre.'

"See what this one says: 'Newspaper *versus* Criminal.' 'The Elusive Blackshirt Wins Second Round.' Here is an extract:

> —— successfully negotiating the cordon of defence which our contemporary, the *Evening Star*, organized in their efforts to frustrate his attempt, Blackshirt still further displayed his contempt for these amateur precautions by choosing as his victim Lady Ballintyre, wife of the managing director of the *Evening Star* Publishing Company, etc.

"Another says Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot would do well to rest her faith in Scotland Yard in future.

"It is the biggest joke for ages—for everybody but ourselves—and—and——" Sir John spluttered in his annoyance. Abruptly he sat down in an easy chair by

the side of the table, and fixed an unwavering stare upon the unhappy journalist.

"Now tell me how the devil that chap got into the grounds?"

"I—I don't know, sir."

"You don't know!" Sir John's already red face darkened to a deeper hue, and he choked slightly.

"No, sir." Hepplewhaite glanced desperately at the chief, but the other turned his eyes away, and Hepplewhaite knew that he would have to fight his battle unsupported. "I have been unable to discover the vaguest clue as to how Blackshirt got into the grounds. Not a single soul passed the gates without an invitation card and, moreover, when he escaped, Blackshirt was in the clothes which earned him his sobriquet, which mean that he must have entered the estate in the same clothes, unless, of course, he changed somewhere inside, and if so, we were unable to find any of his garments. Unless he actually dropped in by means of a parachute I cannot conceive how he managed the trick."

"Your helpers, the servants——"

"All checked up, sir, and none found missing."

"Humph!" Sir John was impressed. "He must be a clever fellow, but now listen to me, Hepplewhaite——" He paused while his face hardened, his voice likewise. "The next time Blackshirt issues another of his challenges the *Evening Star* must win. He has got to be arrested, preferably by yourself, or through your instrumentality. If he should get away again, it may be necessary for the Board to dispense with your services— I'll teach this Mister Blackshirt to steal my wife's jewels."

Hepplewhaite slipped out of the room. He knew the worst, and in the heart of the journalist grew a hatred for two men; for the blustering Chairman of Directors, who would callously sacrifice a man in order to appease

his feelings, outraged not so much by the theft of his wife's jewels as by the laughter of his confreres; and hatred for Blackshirt the criminal, who might yet prove the cause of his discharge from the *Evening Star*.

Before, it had been a game, this business of thwarting Blackshirt. Now, in the mind of Hepplewhaite, it was grim earnestness, and his mouth set tightly, perhaps a trifle cruelly, as he reviewed the position in his mind. It was to be war to the knife, as far as he was concerned, but with one advantage in his favour, he was on the right side of the law, and Blackshirt was on the wrong.

* * * * *

The days had come and gone. Urged forward by the distraught Bobbie, Marshall had redoubled his efforts to chance upon the track of the vanished Blackshirt, but in vain. In each case the report was the same "No news! No news!" until she could have screamed at the monotony, the repetition of his failure.

It was not that the detective, or any of his ex-Scotland Yard assistants, were deficient in skill; rather was it that Verrell had so completely covered up all traces of himself, had left no single direction in which they might turn and say, more hopefully, "Perhaps——"

With the best of intentions Sir Allen was a Job's comforter. Unable successfully to disguise his real feelings, it was not long before Bobbie discovered his fear—that Verrell had committed suicide—and knowing this to be untrue, his barely concealed sympathy was the more galling in that she might not assuage his fears, assure her father that Verrell was alive and probably living not far away.

Somewhere—but where? Where was Blackshirt? In the back of Bobbie's mind was fermenting a plan. Once she could discover Blackshirt's address she would

try, as his "Lady of the Phone," what she, his wife, had failed to do, to bring back into his brain a recollection of the immediate past, of the time which had been obliterated by his accident; but before she could get in touch with him to put her faith to the test, she was afraid—terribly afraid—that in his reawakened audacity he would be captured—arrested—imprisoned.

Remorselessly she crushed down all such thoughts, forced herself to see only the silver lining, and not the formidable aspect of the shadowed, ominous clouds, and in her effort to be of assistance to the detective, all day long she walked the streets of London scanning the face of each passer-by, praying that the next might be that of Richard Verrell, her husband.

Poor as were her efforts, and she, more than anyone, appreciated the veritable uselessness of her daily search, the fatigue of it at least helped to keep her mind from undue pessimism, and so, as the time passed and there was still no news, she commenced her daily routine still earlier in the mornings and finished only when the shades of night served to hide the features of the populace.

To keep her father's mind at rest concerning these daily excursions, she told him her theory—that Richard had possibly lost his memory, and if he, on his part, were sceptical, he did not dissuade her from her endeavours, hesitating to anticipate the evil day which he felt was bound to come sooner or later when the worst, as he imagined it, would be discovered.

There came a time when Marshall began to believe that Verrell was not in London, that he lived somewhere in the country in one of the smaller provincial towns, but Bobbie did not believe in this possibility, for of all the memories she had of Verrell there was one which stood out prominently.

It was of the day, soon after Verrell had purchased his new two-seater Buick, when he had called for her

and had taken her out to Burnham Beeches. While she sat on the springy turf, amid the bracken, he had sprawled alongside, had gloried with her in the beauty of the country. Yet when she had expressed a desire to live permanently in the country he had disagreed. He loved a big city, so he had said, every street of it, every building of it, every brick of it; its drabness, its splendour, its factories, its theatres, its ambitions and aims.

His words had rung too definitely to bear misinterpretation. Blackshirt, the Blackshirt who had spoken to her on that day, would never voluntarily live outside London, and so in Bobbie's mind there was no doubt that somewhere in its teeming streets Verrell lived, secure from foes and friends alike. Only chance would reveal him, or else some mischance which would see his identity exposed to the world, the coupling up of the two names—Richard Verrell the author, officially recuperating in Switzerland, and Blackshirt, the new Blackshirt who was thrilling England with his daring exploits.

One night an old friend of Sir Allen came to dinner; Sir Austin Lavers, ex-Assistant Commissioner of the C.I. Department of Scotland Yard.

Sitting at the head of the table with Sir Austin on her right, Sir Allen on her left, Bobbie grimly wondered to herself what would be the emotions of the two men if they knew the truth that her husband was Blackshirt; Blackshirt the criminal.

It seemed almost as though Sir Austin read her secret thoughts, for suddenly he turned to Sir Allen.

"Well, Allen," he said, "what do you think of this sudden reappearance of our old friend Blackshirt? I do not quite know why, but I always had an idea that we should not hear of him again. You know, since that fire at Mayers, when he saved a girl's life, the police have no record of a fresh crime until suddenly

he wrote to the *Evening Star*. I wonder what made him do that," he added, his eyes gazing dreamily upon the food in front of him, his forehead frowning slightly. "It is not at all like him, for he always worked with the utmost caution. It is so foolish, he is bound to be caught in the end."

Bobbie had to bite her lips to prevent a tiny sigh of pain escaping her. "Why do you think so?" she asked.

Sir Austin shrugged his shoulders. "My dear Bobbie, it is fairly obvious. A case of the pitcher and the well. The man cannot keep on defying the public the way he does. How on earth he has already succeeded twice I do not know. Yet I will say he has both nerve and brain, and in collaboration they go a long way. How did he get away from Lady Kingston's party? No one knows, no one can even make a guess. I cannot, and surely I know enough of criminals and their methods to have a shot at suggesting a solution.

Sir Allen laughed. "It is some time ago since I first came into contact with Blackshirt. Let me see, when was it? I remember! The night before Mona's wedding. By Jove! That was the coolest thing he ever did in his life, to impersonate me. Poor old Marshall! I shall not forget his voice when he informed me over the telephone that Blackshirt had stolen the pearls from under his very nose."

"Pretty cool, as you say, Allen, and yet—what of the challenge he sent to McTavish? One can somehow understand that he is just the sort of man to take a 'dare,' to carry it through successfully!—but best of all——"

The two cronies fell into a long discussion. From Blackshirt the subject passed to criminology, from criminals to Scotland Yard, from thence to St. Stephen's, and finally, as usual, to politics. Sir

Allen, a level-headed Conservative, Sir Austin, a staunch Liberal, in the end, upon whatever subject their conversation might have commenced, invariably it finished in a never-ending discussion on politics.

Usually Bobbie was interested, and, because she was impartial, she clear-sightedly appreciated the weakness or strength of both sides, and never failed to find amusement in their efforts to confound one another. For once, however, her ears were deaf to the weighted words of either friend; something which Sir Austin had said, in speaking of Blackshirt, had reminded her of one night when her father had attended the Ladies' Night at the Junior Arts Club.

Later that night he had told her all about it, of how the conversation had turned upon criminology, of how he himself had told the assembled company of his own experience of Blackshirt, of how McTavish had sneeringly boasted that Blackshirt would never get the better of him, that with the aid of his own works, the world-famous Electrical Accessories Factory, he was fully confident either to keep at bay or else to arrest any nocturnal intruder, even Blackshirt.

Then Bobbie remembered how she had gone to her bedroom, and, acting from some unaccountable impulse, had 'phoned up the man whom she had lately discovered to be Blackshirt. She seemed to remember every word, even now, of the conversation which had followed.

First she had reminded him of McTavish's boast, then informed him that she had forged his name to a letter, and had ordered him to break into McTavish's house the following Thursday night.

He had been surprised, naturally, yet there had been no suggestion of fear or annoyance; rather did it seem to her as though a tinge of pleasure had crept into his voice. Cheerfully he had agreed to carry into effect all that she had commanded, and in the months which

followed Bobbie understood more how he had been affected.

Blackshirt had loved every minute of the night which subsequently followed, if for no other reason than that he was pitting his brains, his nerve, his experience, against the wits, the ingenuity, and the bombast of another man as equally determined as himself.

Of course, he had won, as Bobbie had known that he would, but what now brightened her eyes again was the memory of his voice over the telephone. If there were a way of getting in touch with Blackshirt once more, it would be by imitating McTavish's trick—provoke Blackshirt to a tussle of wits, invite him to burgle a house which he knew to be well protected, and, unless he had altered very, very much, she knew he would accept the challenge, would cheerfully put his head into a trap, secure in the confidence of his own quick wits to enable him to escape again. It would be up to her to see that, for once, he did not succeed. He would be allowed to regain his liberty, but not until she gave the word.

"Don't you think so, Bobbie?" said her father.

"I think it is a marvellous scheme," she said.

There was a sudden silence as the two men gazed at her strangely.

"What on earth do you mean?" asked her father at last.

Bobbie coloured deeply, then, arising, she crossed to him and flung her arms around his neck. "I was day-dreaming, daddy dear."

Sir Allen patted her fondly and glanced at his watch. "Good Lord! Nearly midnight. Time you went to bed, Bobbie. Come along, Austin, one last spot in the library." And the two men made their exit into another room, Sir Allen puzzling why his daughter was not more troubled at her husband's disappearance.

* * * * *

The next morning Marshall came to report. He found Bobbie alone, Sir Allen having gone to the City on business.

Dejectedly he lowered his eyes as he stood before her. He could not face her searching, eager gaze.

"Still no news, Mrs. Verrell," he said.

Bobbie sighed. "Poor Mr. Marshall! You are looking care-worn, tired. You have been up late?"

"There was the faintest clue," he acknowledged apologetically; "it led me to a public-house, not far from Limehouse, where I had to stop until rather early this morning." He shrugged his shoulders. "A false one as usual! My quarry turned out to be a cat-burglar badly wanted by Scotland Yard. I tipped them the wink, and he was arrested."

His lips curved bitterly as he continued. "I feel afraid. Supposing someone else does to Blackshirt what I did last night to that other man. I almost felt mean. In fact, if it were not that his wife is better off when he is in prison, I might have ignored his presence and let him go. It was not really my duty; I am retired. Still, poor little Janie would thank me if she knew. She will be able to have her new baby in peace. Once she was in the same condition—he returned home drunk as a lord and knocked her down—the child is a hopeless cripple."

"Won't you sit down?" Bobbie said gently.

He gazed abstractedly at the chair which she indicated. Then he flushed as he realized that his thoughts had carried him away.

"I feel afraid, Mrs. Verrell. So long as Blackshirt remains quiet everything is all right. The Yard has no description of him whatever, and so far as I know there is not a soul to recognize him, but—last night there was a burglary in Wakefield Avenue. For some reason or other the Yard puts it down to Blackshirt. They are after him red-hot, and as for the *Evening*

Star——" He looked toward her. "You have not read the latest edition?" Bobbie shook her head. "It is worse than ever! Blackshirt must be caught! Have they not, by publishing his letters, given the police every chance, and yet Blackshirt still walks about a free man! And so on, for a whole column. I do not understand that yellow rag. For some time it seemed to picture him as a sort of hero, then all of a sudden it changed the day after Blackshirt got away from Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot's garden fête, and now it is down upon him like a load of hot bricks. If—if—we do not succeed soon, Mrs. Verrell, it—it may be too late."

Bobbie caught in her breath with a gasp of pain. "God forbid!" she moaned. "I—I could not stand it, Mr. Marshall. Not because of the disgrace! I am his wife and more than willing to share his troubles as well as his pleasures. It would be the separation——" She shivered. "I dare not talk about it."

She turned her head away. Marshall caught a glimpse of a tiny lace-bordered handkerchief. Yet, when Bobbie turned round again, her face was clear.

"Listen, Mr. Marshall. Last night Sir Austin Lavers was dining with daddy. The subject of Blackshirt cropped up, and Sir Austin commenced to talk of the time Richard broke into McTavish's home. You remember?"

Marshall smiled faintly. "I shall never forget! For once I sympathized with the criminal instead of the householder."

"You have never heard the real history of that night. I will tell you." So Bobbie told the detective how it was that she was responsible for the challenge. Then next she outlined her plan.

When she had finished Marshall grunted. "A case of Mahomet and the mountain, the moth and the candle. But you must tell me more, Mrs. Verrell. Supposing he does take up the glove—what next?"

"That is up to you and me, Mr. Marshall. He must believe it to be a trap. He will be sure to get in somehow, and we must not prevent him. It is when he goes out that we must be prepared. Somehow we must arrange matters so that he will apparently be able to get away through only one exit. There you must station a man. When Blackshirt goes, the man must follow, and in that way we shall find out where he is living."

Marshall puckered his lips. "A good idea—though——! It is easy enough to shadow a man during the day, but at night, when the streets are quiet, when every footstep echoes for miles—— However, that might be arranged, but the next thing is, how are you going to convey that challenge to him?"

"Why, through the *Evening Star*."

"Yes, and Scotland Yard will step in. I have learned that the next time Blackshirt issues a challenge in the *Evening Star* they are going to make their own arrangements. Up till now they have believed it to be more a newspaper stunt than anything else, but they have changed their minds. Also what house are you going to pick for the trap?"

Bobbie's eyes filled with tears, and, placing her handkerchief to her mouth, she bit the corner of it. "I—I had not thought of that," she murmured.

The detective saw her lips tremble, and the sight filled his heart with pity. "Don't take too much notice of my objections," he said gruffly. "Doubtless they can be got over, but one must not under-estimate the difficulties. See if we cannot think out some scheme, Mrs. Verrell, you and me together."

Five, ten, fifteen minutes ticked by, and neither of them spoke a word. Marshall was thinking deeply. He foresaw possibilities in the scheme suggested by Bobbie, but there was a lot to be said against it, as he had already pointed out to her.

How to keep Scotland Yard out of the deal was the first point to be considered, but the more he thought over the matter, the less prospect he could see of so doing. Supposing Bobbie did use the house of a friend for her purpose, and wrote to the *Evening Star*, Scotland Yard would take care to have its men around. Then there would be no question of merely trailing Blackshirt to an address somewhere in London. They would pounce upon their man without hesitation, and——

Was there any way in which Blackshirt could be approached other than through the newspaper? Marshall unconsciously shrugged his shoulders. It was difficult to send a message to a man whose address was positively unknown, not as it had been in the old days when Bobbie had known where he lived—where he had lived.

The detective's thoughts riotously tumbled over themselves as a sudden scheme entered his head. In case, in the first flush of enthusiasm, he was being too optimistic, coldly and concisely he forced himself to think more slowly, more rationally, to turn the matter over in his mind again and again, but in the end he realized that if anything were likely to succeed he had indeed stumbled upon the one possible solution of the problem.

With a modest chuckle of pleasure at his own acumen he turned to Bobbie. In quick, well-chosen words he told her of his idea, and as she listened her cheeks flushed, and her eyes sparkled more brightly.

* * * * *

Verrell awoke at an early hour, still feeling more or less weary. The whole night through vague dreams had haunted him; extraordinary visions had intrigued him of happenings which were not stamped with the usual hall-mark of fantasy and unreality. They seemed

indefinably plausible, but, vanishing as soon as he awoke, he was left only with the essence of them rather than with the remembrance of any one particular incident.

It was as if he were always searching, seeking for something or someone hidden from his prying eyes by a curtain of obscurity. In his dreams he was well aware that in his subconscious mind was a something which pulled him ever forward in an effort to solve its identity, yet when he would have deciphered the tantalizing puzzle, far from succeeding, the haze became darker and deeper. Thereafter he would awake, exhausted by his mental struggling, and although at the back of his mind he still remained conscious of a something missing, he was better able to confine his thoughts to more material subjects.

With a listlessness unusual to him, he arose, and, just as he finished dressing, he heard the breakfast gong which Mrs. Jones had insisted upon tolling since she had taken in a paying guest.

Breakfast dragged slowly to a finish, and it was not until the toast and coffee stage was reached that anyone indulged in much conversation. Then, without warning, Nellie Jones launched a question at Verrell which left him in a quandary as to what answer he should give.

"Mr. Thomson, you do work, don't you?"

In order to gain time, he said slowly: "Why do you ask, Miss Jones?"

"I—I—you seem to have no friends, to go out very little, and yet—you have the keen look of a man who has to fight for his living."

Mr. and Mrs. Jones exchanged surprised glances, amused by their daughter's display of perspicacity. Meanwhile Verrell puzzled his brain to think of a reply which should not arouse suspicion in the minds of the Jones family. Quickly he decided that the truth, discreetly used, would serve him well.

"As—as a matter of fact, I—I am trying to make my living as a writer."

"An author! Oh!" Nellie breathed the words into the air with an ecstatic sigh, and Verrell grinned to himself. Every action of Nellie's was affected, studied; he guessed that this was due not so much to mere affectation as to the fact that she was an enthusiastic cinema-goer, an ardent reader of romance.

Mrs. Jones sat up. Her lodger an author! What an opportunity for Nellie! She studied Verrell with new interest. If he made sufficient money to keep them both in comfort, what a catch he would prove to be!

"You write stories? I have, perhaps, read some of your works?" she questioned, smiling sweetly upon him.

"Not many, I am afraid." Verrell allowed his face to fall into dejected lines. "I am still a beginner, still endeavouring to persuade elusive editors to realize what they miss when they return my manuscripts."

"Surely you are too modest, Mr. Thomson. Since you have been here you have not had a single story returned to you." She fondly imagined a naive innocence to be in her tone. Verrell's eyes narrowed slightly. It had not so far occurred to him that they might watch any correspondence he should receive. He realized his good fortune in that, up to then, there had been no post for him whatsoever.

"I have given up short stories for the time being," he remarked easily, "for I am trying my hand at my first novel."

"I hope it goes well, young man," interrupted Mr. Jones, tired of having remained silent so long. "I have always thought that if only I had put my hand to writing I could have turned out some wonderful stories."

"No doubt," agreed his wife tartly. "You practise enough on me." Then she turned to Verrell. "You write under your own name, Mr. Thomson?"

"Yes," he acknowledged, his eyes twinkling. He had told nothing less than the truth, even though the name under which he wrote was scarcely the one by which they knew him.

In the meantime he was embarrassed by Nellie's admiring gaze. From the moment he had described himself as a writer she had not taken her eyes from him.

Suddenly, taking advantage of a slight pause in the conversation, she asked him a question which set his pulse tingling. "Mr. Thomson, do you know Richard Verrell, the famous author?"

He stiffened acutely. The familiar name seemed to have been interposed into the conversation like a bolt from a clear sky. There had been no warning, no indication, why, of all the authors there were, she should pick upon the one name which meant so much to him.

Across the breakfast-table he looked into her eyes, but so far as he could judge they were innocent enough. Evidently, however, she had an ulterior motive for putting the question.

"I have met him once or twice along Fleet Street. Why do you ask?" he questioned casually.

"Isn't he what people call a—a—crim—criminologist as well as being a writer of criminal stories?"

He tapped his foot impatiently upon the floor. Why didn't she answer his question? "I have heard something about that," he replied.

"Well now, isn't that funny?" she giggled.

"What is funny?"

"Haven't you read all about him in the morning newspaper?" she asked.

"Not yet!" He smiled, endeavouring to conceal his impatience as best he could. What the devil was there in the papers about him? "Would you like to tell me?"

"Oh no!" She smiled back at him. "That would

spoil the story. I will show it to you after breakfast."

Somehow or other he swallowed down his coffee, but with an infuriating slowness Mr. Jones dragged out the time. He wanted a little more coffee, another piece of toast, some more jam, until Verrell could have cheerfully thrown the whole breakfast-table at him.

At length the meal finished. Nellie, with an arch look, handed him the *Daily Sun*. With almost a snatch he took the paper from her hands, and with a muttered word of apology hurried up to his room, flung himself into a chair, and opened wide the *Daily Sun*, eager to read the news of himself.

It did not take him long to discover it.

POPULAR WRITER ROBBED

Last night the apartment of Mr. Richard Verrell, the famous novelist of criminal fiction and amateur criminologist, was the scene of an easily effected, if somewhat impudent robbery, when, some time between the hours of eleven p.m. and two a.m. a burglar entered the flat which Mr. Verrell occupies in Notting Hill, and helped himself to many of the valuables which were locked in a reliable safe in one of the rooms.

The nocturnal entry was discovered by an intelligent police-constable who, while inspecting the doors of the garage, above which Mr. Verrell lives, noticed a light streaming from one of the windows of the flat. Aware that Mr. Verrell is recuperating in Switzerland from the after-effects of the terrible railway accident in France, and that Mrs. Verrell is staying with her father, Sir Allen Dunn, the constable immediately whistled for assistance, and the building was surrounded, but evidently the intruder had already made his departure, for when

there was no answer to the repeated knocking of the police an entry was forced, and the rooms were found to be in a state of chaos.

Immediately Roberts, Mr. Verrell's valet who lives a short distance away, and who is responsible for the apartment during his master's absence, was summoned to the spot; upon making a brief inspection he reported that not only had the burglar secured all Mr. Verrell's jewellery, and several things which he understands Mr. Verrell prizes very highly, but evidently the burglar has a grim sense of humour, for he also carried away with him many curiosities of past crimes which the criminologist had carefully collected in his studies of crime and criminals.

It is understood that the police are in possession of several valuable clues, and an arrest may be expected shortly.

There was humour of a kind in the burglary. The newspapers marked it, Nellie noticed it, doubtless there were many who had already chuckled about it, but of them there was not one who appreciated the jest more than Verrell himself.

Reading the paragraph through for the second time, the laughter welled up in his heart. That Verrell, the amateur criminologist, should be robbed contained more than a spice of irony in itself, but what of the truth? What of the queer prank the gods had played him? Blackshirt robbed! Blackshirt, the cleverest criminal of all, burgled by one of the lesser fraternity!

For the third time he scanned the report, and then his face began to sober, and his forehead creased. What had Roberts said? "Several things which he understands Mr. Verrell prizes very highly——"

What were the things which he prized highly? For the first time he regretted the impulse which had made

him flee from his snug retreat in Notting Hill. It was aggravating enough to read that he had been robbed, without not knowing what it was of which he had been plundered. Worse still, there was no method of satisfying himself upon that point.

Being presumably in Switzerland—a very satisfactory alibi—it would be more than folly to show himself to Roberts, and betray the fact that the newspaper lied. Nor could he write, or make inquiries. The more he thought over the matter the more annoyed he became. What on earth did Roberts mean? What were the "very highly prized" things which had been stolen? As for the mention of Mrs. Verrell——!

His lips smiled scornfully, even if his eyes hardened. She so obviously represented a trap of some kind. Yet, for all that, he had to admit to himself that the woman who passed herself as Mrs. Verrell had nerve and audacity almost equal to his own.

Daughter of Sir Allen Dunn! The name seemed curiously familiar! Sir Allen Dunn! He racked his brain to trace any particular reason why he should know the name. Peculiarly enough, in some way or other he connected it up with pearls—Sir Allen Dunn—a pearl necklace—— His head whirled with the effort to remember, until in the end he reverted to the newspaper again.

It seemed as if the quick change of ideas cleared his thoughts, for suddenly he discovered a way of securing the knowledge he wanted so badly. His eyes lighted with a gleam of amusement, the humour of his thoughts parted his lips, and the smile which creased his features lengthened and broadened till finally he laughed aloud.

What a positively stupendous jest, what an ironical joke upon the world! Once again the flat of Richard Verrell would be broken into, once again the police would investigate a new burglary, but this time the miscreant would be Richard Verrell himself. Blackshirt

breaking into his own flat! What better way would there be of elucidating the mystery of the missing valuables?

* * * * *

He did not get an opportunity to carry out his project until three nights later, a Sunday night. Mr. Jones had been stocktaking, so had not returned home each night until practically midnight, and by the t ne Verrell judged that everyone would be safely sound asleep, it was too late to venture out in order to be back early enough to avoid any possible chance of discovery.

Sunday, however, was a day of rest. At dinner Mr. Jones intimated that he intended to retire to bed at an early hour, and hinted that it would not hurt the rest of the household to follow suit.

In some ways Mr. Jones's word was law, even though, generally speaking, his wife ruled the roost; and Verrell quickly judged that by nine-thirty at the latest it would be a house of slumber.

"I am sorry," he apologized, "but just as it happens I have to go out to-night, but I promise faithfully not to make the slightest sound when I return."

"You do as you like, of course, Mr. Thomson," said Mr. Jones, endeavouring to look as though he meant all he said.

Nellie looked at Verrell with a side glance. "You are not going to one of those naughty Sunday plays, I hope," she said, and giggled.

He shook his head. "No, no! As a matter of fact, it is a dinner; an editor has invited me," he lied cheerfully.

By seven o'clock he was dressed, and as he opened the front door he heard a slight rustle behind him.

"Good-night, Mr. Thomson. I do hope you will enjoy yourself," Nellie murmured softly, as she lingeringly shut the door.

There was plenty of time before him, so he walked to Clapham Junction, and as his swinging stride carried him in and out of the usual Sunday evening promenaders he hummed faintly to himself Delilah's song from the opera, *Samson and Delilah.*

He arranged his programme so that he should reach Notting Hill about ten-thirty. Once there he crushed the dark felt hat which he was wearing further down over his eyes and lifted the silk scarf higher over his chin, for he was now in a neighbourhood where he was known. He walked slowly down Kenilworth Road and was glad to see the man in charge of the garage preparing to lock the doors. To give the mechanic time to get clear away he walked down to the end of the road and as far as the Park. Then he turned once more toward his flat.

Already the streets were quiet with the solemnity of the British Sunday evening. Very few people were about, and those who were seemed to glide along apologetically, as though they knew they were in the wrong not to be home with their families.

As he came near the entrance which led up to the small courtyard in which was the garage he looked swiftly up and down the street, but no one was facing his direction, so he dived quickly into the shadows of the motor-drive.

Once in the courtyard he was safe from observation, for no windows other than his own overlooked the garage. By the side of his bedroom was a reliable drain-pipe running down to the ground. With the easy grace of an athlete he shinned up this, and with the help of a small tool from his belt quickly twisted back the clasp of the window, and the next moment was inside his own flat.

He carefully drew the blinds: there must be no more chance of discoveries by intelligent police-constables! Assured that there would be no possibility of light

filtering through, he flung off his hat and coat and adjusted his mask. Once more he was Blackshirt—and his blood tingled with an exhilarating sensation.

He switched on a small but powerful electric flashlight and gazed around the familiar bedroom. How many midnight excursions had he made from here, how many handsome hauls had he brought back with him? Nothing seemed changed—then he grinned as he remembered that there was no reason why it should. It was not years but weeks only since he had been absent, though strangely enough he had a feeling as if a much longer time had elapsed.

The beam of the lamp moved around: at last, it rested upon the mantelpiece, upon a tiny miniature portrait in water colours, and Blackshirt started. He recognized the features, the petite face, alive with expression, and the wave of the auburn hair. They belonged to the one whom he had encountered in the gardens surrounding the house of Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot, to the one who said she was his wife.

With a rapid stride he crossed the room and picked up the miniature. Raising it in his hand he would have flung it into the grate beneath, but even as his arm commenced to descend some strange impulse restrained him and he looked again at the portrait.

Despite his anger he was once more struck by its depicted beauty, and he experienced a slight swelling round his heart. Supposing it could only have been the truth—that she were indeed his wife; and not a decoy of the police to entrap him . . .? A shadow of pain crossed his eyes. There were times when he felt unaccountably lonely. . . .

He slipped the miniature into his pocket. After all—and he smiled cynically when the thought occurred to him—if she were his wife, then he was entitled to it!

Cautiously he moved into the next room, where was

the safe. He was anxious to open it; eager to find out if, upon looking inside it, he would remember what was likely to be there. Of course, there should have been all his jewellery, his studs and sleeve-links, etc., but they were all insured, and in due course, when he returned from "Switzerland" there was no reason why he should not recover the value. It was the "highly prized" things he wanted to discover.

He kneeled before the safe and turned the handle to and fro. Then for the first time he realized he had forgotten the combination. It was unbelievable; incredible! Yet though he endeavoured to remember, he could not. His mind was as blank as though he had never known it.

His loss of memory gave him no cause for annoyance. There were ways of opening safes other than by knowing the official combination—and he laughed. The situation was rapidly becoming paradoxical. Blackshirt opening his own safe——

Ten minutes later the door of the safe swung open. Now he would know! He directed the beam of his torch into the interior—he could not believe his eyes; for a moment the safe reeled before his gaze, mistily dancing up and down.

There was no mistake. There, prominently displayed so that nobody opening the safe could fail to see it, was an envelope, marked with one single word:

"BLACKSHIRT"

Blackshirt! He was Blackshirt, therefore the envelope was intended for him! He shook his head. How preposterous! How could it be for him? Who knew in the first place that he was even likely to look into the safe—and the answer occurred automatically to him. Someone must know that Blackshirt and Verrell were one and the same!

The hand which held the torch trembled slightly, causing the light to flicker to and fro. He frowned as he realized that he had received rather a shock, and with an effort of will he concentrated on steadying his hand until once again the beam shone firmly.

Who knew his secret? McTavish! Ronald McTavish! His memory groped back into that dim period which was so black to him. He remembered McTavish denouncing him—after that no more. Was this envelope from McTavish?

"Open it and find out, you idiot!" whispered common sense. He stretched out his hand and plucked the envelope from its resting-place.

It was sealed down, and rubbing the two sides together he could feel another piece of paper inside. There seemed no doubt that inside was something for him, so inserting his forefinger he slit open the envelope and extracted its contents, a thin sheet of paper, folded in half. He straightened it out, and with the light from his torch illuminating the neatly written lines, he read the following:

BLACKSHIRT,

Sooner or later you will read this message. Why the writer is so certain of that is a matter for you to put two and two together and arrive at the truth.

First of all, I should explain that I mean you no harm, but I claim your services. I regret to use the word, but if you should see fit to be so ungallant as to refuse—a word as to your real identity whispered in proper quarters. . . . But let us keep away from an unpleasant subject.

It is a question of a wager which I have had with a friend. I am sure of keeping at bay any criminal in the world—even Blackshirt. My friend prefers to back you. Therefore our friendly

argument has been put down in terms of money, and you, my friend, must help me to prove my argument.

On the thirty-first of this month you must break into Manor House, three miles away from Uxbridge. It will be well guarded. If you get caught or leave behind any clue by which you can be traced, then I shall win my bet. If, on the contrary, you can pierce through my protective barrier and escape, then, unfortunately, I shall be the loser by £50. As for safety, you must accept my word of honour that you will not be betrayed.

On the thirty-first, my friend Blackshirt! You will be there, I know. Liberty is still sweet! On the thirty-first between the hours of 11 p.m. and 3 a.m. That night I shall have the honour of meeting a distinguished criminal face to face, for, believe me, I am certain to succeed.

Au revoir, Blackshirt.

AN OPTIMISTIC, IF AMATEUR, CRIMINOLOGIST.

Twice he read it through before he could force himself to believe that the whole message was not just a wild nightmare. When he came to the end of it the second time his lips curved into a smile—a smile which while not devoid of bitterness, yet was at the same time one of joyous anticipation. Here was a deed after his own heart, a challenge well worth the accepting, even if it had not contained a distinct threat.

What matter that his secret was known? Somehow he felt he could rely on the word of the writer, and if so—gradually the initial bitterness faded away—he was quite sure of winning the trick. If professionals could not catch him, then what hope for amateurs?

He took a match from his pocket, and, lighting it, applied it to both envelope and message, watching the

devouring flames effectively destroying both. Next he shut the safe, there being no longer the need to discover what had been burgled, for now he saw through the whole scheme, and realized that it was all a fake for the sole purpose of attracting him there that he might obtain the message.

With one final look round to see that he had left everything in order, he switched off his torch and swung back the heavy shielding curtains. Everything seemed quite clear outside, so he blithely stepped on to the window-sill, relatched the window, and shinned down to the courtyard.

As he walked toward Hyde Park he softly whistled to himself a tune from *La Tosca*. Ten more nights, and then the thirty-first. . . .

* * * * *

"You are really sure everything is quite safe, Mr. Marshall?" There was a pleading note in Bobbie's voice.

The detective smiled. "Don't you worry, Mrs. Verrell. I have gone over the scheme a dozen times, two dozen times, analyzed minutely every possible loop-hole or twist or turn. Honestly I believe I have evolved a positively water-tight trap. Only one thing can cause this plot to fail."

"And that?"

"If Blackshirt fails to turn up."

Bobbie shook her head decidedly. "I do not count that a possibility, Mr. Marshall. Richard will come sooner or later."

"Then from the moment he enters this house until he leaves he will be shadowed. As you know, he will escape, but not without being seen by at least one of our men, and unless I have made a very big mistake Blackshirt will lead him right to the very door of his new home."

"But won't he suspect? Will not the very easiness with which he will be able to gain admittance into Manor House raise his suspicions?"

Marshall laughed. "Who said it was going to be easy, Mrs. Verrell? Nothing of the sort. What I have done is to imagine that I really want to capture him, or else keep him out, and set my plans accordingly. He will find a way in somehow or other."

"But you have left one weak spot in the armour, surely."

"Well, just one," admitted the detective, "but honestly I do not expect him to make use of it. I am afraid to his discerning eye its very obviousness will be suspicious in itself. Yet on the face of it I would swear that it will be his only way in——" He shrugged his shoulders. "He may, of course, come in that way. Anyhow, it will be all the same. He can only come to one spot—this room—and if he does I shall collar him."

"But I thought he was to escape?" Bobbie's unsophisticated mind could not follow the intricacies of the game. With little or no knowledge of the cunning of even the average nocturnal marauder, she did not realize that it would need super-cunning to counter Blackshirt's moves.

"So he will, Mrs. Verrell," explained Marshall, patiently, "but only by his own efforts. One knot I shall leave just the faintest bit looser than the others. He will find it, and when we are not looking he will slip from our grasp. . . . When he gets outside, one of my men will pick up his trail. No, don't you worry. I really believe I have Blackshirt taped this time."

Bobbie smiled bewitchingly. "It is lovely to hear you say that, Mr. Marshall. It makes me feel almost twice as happy." She looked away, memories of another night when she had awaited the coming of

Blackshirt flooding her mind. Suddenly she looked up, startled.

"Mr. Marshall—he is not already in the house?"

The other shook his head, his eyes smiling. "You were thinking of the time McTavish tried to get the better of him? Unless he can creep into a mouse-hole, Blackshirt is not already in the house. But listen——"

Downstairs in the old-fashioned hall an ancient grandfather's clock struck the hour of eleven, and the echo of it floated weirdly round the house.

"Any time now," said Marshall, and he switched off the electric light.

By the time midnight had struck it seemed to Bobbie that many hours must have passed by. Nothing had happened, and the solemn quietness, the tense atmosphere, the rigidity with which she held herself, all contrived to unnerve her, to cause her to wish to make some noise or other to ease the overpowering quietness, but for the sake of her husband she forced herself to remain still.

The worst part of the waiting was one thought which obsessed her: Supposing Blackshirt did not come? Supposing, even if he did come, Marshall's scheme should fail and Blackshirt escape without being shadowed home?

If to-night Marshall and she failed, when again would it be possible to create a second favourable possibility of tracking Blackshirt to his new home? Perhaps never! Blackshirt would not nibble twice at the same bait.

Desperately she clenched her tiny hands. Marshall must, *must* succeed. Her husband's liberty was at stake, her life's happiness in jeopardy.

She heard Marshall, sitting in a chair to her left, draw in his breath with a sharp hissing sound, and Bobbie knew his keener ears must have heard a sus-

picious noise. Her heart leapt joyfully. If the detective were not mistaken, Blackshirt was approaching. Quiveringly, her nerves taut, her ears set to catch the slightest sound, she listened. For perhaps a minute—a minute which seemed so long drawn out to her that she almost sighed with despair—there was nothing, but then suddenly, somewhere along the passage outside, there was a faint scratching sound. Happiness welled up from her heart into her throat, and two tears slipped from the corners of each eye slowly to trickle down her cheeks.

Blackshirt was walking into the trap, Blackshirt was coming! Already a guard—if Marshall's instructions had been implicitly obeyed—would be awaiting the exit of the man who had entered, and, once the signal was given, not one window nor one door in the whole of the rambling Manor House would be unguarded or unwatched, either by ex-detectives stationed inside the house, or the men who had been placed in the fields surrounding it.

So quiet was everything that she could hear Marshall breathing heavily; then it occurred to her that her own breath was escaping from her chest with deep, resounding gasps of excitement.

After the scraping noise there was not a sound of any sort, but that did not worry Bobbie. She had seen Blackshirt in action, and was well aware of the wonderful quietness with which he worked. Not only had he the aptitude, gained by years of constant practice, of moving his feet with the silence of a wraith, but of moving about in the dark as easily as in the revealing daylight, his nerve-bound finger-tips acting as his eyes.

The minutes ticked by; there was a slight rustling movement at the door. He was coming in! A few seconds more, if all went well, and she would see her husband again! Then, without the slightest warning,

the lights flashed on, and Bobbie was temporarily blinded by the illumination.

Everything was misty to her eyes; she could but dimly see the tableau displayed before her: Marshall standing upright in the middle of the room, his right hand clenching an ugly revolver, and the intruder at the door, his hand still on the switch which he had depressed.

"My God!" The words were Marshall's, and something in the expression of his voice, a dim note of ghastly despair, warned Bobbie that something was wrong, and, frantically urged by a sense of horror which gripped hold of her, her eyes cleared.

No need to ask the reason for Marshall's exclamation. It was not Blackshirt at the door, but a total stranger, a man who, as far as she could remember, she had never before seen in her life.

"What the hell do you want here?" The detective did not lower his revolver, as he glared suspiciously at the man, but behind his rough words was an air of overwhelming astonishment.

The man at the door was quite at ease. "The same as you, my friends." He laughed calmly.

"What do you mean?" Marshall's eyes narrowed, and his lips twitched uneasily.

"Merely that I, too, am on the lookout for Blackshirt."

Bobbie gasped, and a spasm of fear crossed her face. Marshall was better schooled, and his expression did not alter, but the muzzle of the revolver which he held moved slightly upward, more exactly covering the stranger.

"Who are you?" he barked.

The other smiled. "You don't recognize me, Marshall? We have met several times at the courts. I am Hepplewhaite, of the *Evening Star*, and by Go—George"—his tone grew harder—"I have come here to-

night to be of assistance to you and see that this Blackshirt man gets his deserts at last."

Marshall bit his lips. In the twinkling of an eye the situation had changed. With the appearance of Hepplewhaite, whom he now recollected, the coming of Blackshirt would be fraught with danger.

In order to gain time to think, on the one hand, and on the other to discover the reason for the reporter's unexpected arrival, Marshall motioned the other to a chair and pocketed his revolver.

"What are you gassing about, Hepplewhaite? Good Lord! I know you reporters are not devoid of nerve, but even you cannot butt into people's private residences at this time of night. Do you realize that you are liable to arrest?"

Hepplewhaite frowned. "Don't try to bluff me, Marshall. It won't act. I know very well what this little reception party means. It means, to be precise, that you and Mrs. Verrell have a bet with each other—you must have done well to be able to go as far as fifty pounds—and that you are even now awaiting the arrival of this crook to see whether you can get the better of him, or he the better of you. I suppose you have backed yourself to capture him, and Mrs. Verrell that he will get away." He shook his head remonstratingly. "Hero-worship, Mrs. Verrell. He is only a common or garden crook, merely a trifle cleverer and more successful than his numerous fellow-craftsmen."

"Never mind about that, Hepplewhaite. We are not discussing the morals of the case at the moment. Besides"—Marshall grinned, and quoted from an old number of the *Evening Star*—"'here was a man who was more quixotic than materialistic, one who stole only to return, one who burgled for the love of it——' Who wrote that? It seems to me that your paper has changed its views in the last few days. What are you here for, and how have you learned about this bet?"

Hepplewhaite laughed sneeringly. "A reporter discovers a lot of things he is not supposed to. Still, I do not mind telling you. Listen. Nearly a fortnight ago there was a burglary at the flat of Richard Verrell, the author——" Suddenly Hepplewhaite stopped dead, and his eyes travelled slowly to where Bobbie was sitting. He said nothing for a second, but just looked, and Marshall shivered slightly. He could read the thoughts of the reporter, and realized that Hepplewhaite was calculating, deducing, comparing one circumstance with another—and the detective knew that Blackshirt was nearer to discovery than he had ever been before.

In the meantime Hepplewhaite commenced to speak again. "But, of course, Mrs. Verrell, you must know all about that. I was forgetting. It is your husband's flat." A tiny smile quivered on his lips as he turned to Marshall again. "For some reason or other that particular burglary intrigued me, so that I spent quite a time thinking it over. After a while I reached the conclusion there was only one man of whom I know who, besides possessing the requisite skill, had also the ironical sense of humour which the burglar displayed—robbing an amateur criminologist of his treasured collections of criminal relics. . . . And that man was Blackshirt.

"As you know, the *Evening Star* is more than interested in Blackshirt, so one night I determined to investigate. To do this it was necessary to get into the flat. On looking round I discovered a small courtyard, in which only the windows of Mr. Verrell's flat overlook——" Again he stopped short, and Marshall inwardly groaned. Almost at once, however, the reporter continued: "To cut my story short, I eventually found my way into the flat, and I am sure, in the cause of justice, that you will accept my apologies, Mrs. Verrell. There I found a paper on the floor,

which had been burned. Something made me suspicious of it, so I carefully carried the charred remains away with me. These I treated in the manner well known to experts, and that was by painting the reverse side with a solution of aluminium acetate, continuing the ignition, and rendering firm the white ash which remained by applying a solution of collodion. The iron pigment in the ink stood out well against the burned background.

"Now you know how I learned of to-night's wager. I wonder how the police came to overlook such an obvious clue?" he remarked softly, almost as if to himself.

"Very interesting," said Marshall dryly, "but forgive me, Mr. Hepplewhaite, I still fail to see why you are here? This is purely a private matter."

Hepplewhaite's face creased into ugly lines. "I will forget for the moment, Mr. Marshall, that, apart from the fact of your old association with the Yard, you are, even as a private citizen, infringing the laws of this country of ours by neglecting to deliver Blackshirt into the hands of the police, by giving you a glimpse into my own private history.

"If the policy of the *Evening Star* has changed lately toward Blackshirt, no one is to blame other than Blackshirt himself. Unfortunately, the one lady he robbed happened to be the wife of our chairman and director. I may as well tell you that I have had an ultimatum delivered to me. Either Blackshirt is arrested—of course, through the instrumentality of the *Evening Star*—or else I shall be fired." His teeth set, and his lips drew back in a thin, cruel line. "My work is all I have to live on, and at home I have a wife, and soon there will be a child. By God! I'll see that Blackshirt meets with his just deserts if it takes every penny I possess. What the hell is he to me that I should suffer for him? If he comes to-night you and I will arrest

him, Marshall, and if you or anyone else stops me, I warn you, I shall not hesitate to let the Yard know. Now then, what about it?"

Marshall could not think coherently. Not for a moment had he imagined a situation like this cropping up. What could he do? Supposing Blackshirt turned up? He saw Hepplewhaite rising from his chair, and, seeing the reporter's eyes flickering in the direction of the light, knew he was about to switch it off. Helplessly he gazed around. Was there nothing he could do? Then, outside the window, he saw that which caused him to gasp with surprise, and then, as his brain worked more quickly than it ever had before, to smile with pleasure at his own perspicacity. With a lightning move of the hand he plucked his revolver from his pocket and covered the reporter with it.

"Stop perfectly still," he commanded suddenly, and Hepplewhaite halted.

"What's the game?" he asked. "If you think—— Good God!"

He saw Marshall signalling to the window, and followed the direction of the detective's arm. Then he saw, illuminated by the light above his head, a policeman gazing in at the scene inside.

The constable moved away, but only to enter the house, and the next moment he was inside.

"What's all this?" he asked ponderously. "What are all you doing here? This house is supposed to be empty, Mr. Mainwaring being down in the south of France." He gazed around. "This looks fishy to me."

He would have continued, but Marshall interrupted. "All right, constable, you needn't worry. My name's Marshall, retired from the Yard. Know the name?"

"Can't say as how I do," growled the policeman.

"You can soon find out. Remember the Mullings murder?"

The other nodded.

"Well! I arrested Jacobs. He got hanged for it."

The constable nodded his head slowly. "Yes, now I remember. You're O.K. What about them two?" and he jerked his head firstly toward Bobbie, and then in the direction of Hepplewhaite.

"Mrs. Richard Verrell, daughter of Sir Allen Dunn. Mrs. Verrell has had permission to stop here to-night from Mr. Mainwaring, and asked me to look after her."

"And the other one—who's he?"

"Hepplewhaite, reporter on the *Evening Star*," said Hepplewhaite for himself.

"Hear that, constable?" said Marshall. "That's his tale. He is one of these humorous merchants. I should cover a reporter of the *Evening Star* with my revolver, I don't think! He broke in, half an hour ago, and I caught him red-handed. I was just going to ring up the station. Lucky you came along."

Hepplewhaite gasped. "My Lord! You liar!"

"Now, then, none of that lip." The constable moved to the side of the frantic journalist. "You get rough and I'll give you a tap with my truncheon." He gripped Hepplewhaite firmly by the arm, then turned to Marshall. "I knew there was something suspicious on when I saw the light here. I'll take him along to the station, and you can charge him to-morrow." He coughed slightly. "You meet many of the toffs up there?" he asked, and jerked his head toward where London slept.

"One or two," lied Marshall. "Why?"

"Er—nothing—but a word or two about this here affair to-night——" He looked down at his arm. "I have always thought stripes would look well on me."

Marshall grinned. "Right you are, old man. Just you trot that man along. He is probably an old lag."

"You wait, you just wait, you damned liar." Despite himself Hepplewhaite could not restrain his fury. "If you think your fairy story will carry weight for two minutes, you are jolly well mistaken. I'll blaze this story over the front page for the next four weeks, and as for the rest——" He laughed suddenly. "I am not a mathematician, Marshall, but I know what two and two make."

"Enough of that! Stow it, I say!" The constable tightened his grip, and Hepplewhaite winced. "You come along o' me to the station. I knows your sort. Come along." He marched the struggling reporter to the door. "Good-night, ma'am, you'll be safe as long as I'm about. Good-night, Mr. Marshall, and—ahem! —you won't forget?"

"Don't you worry. I will remember."

Then the two men were gone, and Marshall and Bobbie were left alone.

Marshall turned to Bobbie. "Mrs. Verrell; my men are still posted. I shall change my plans. Let Blackshirt come and go. I am going to follow Hepplewhaite and that policeman. I know the sergeant at his station. I'll try to see Hepplewhaite does not persuade him to make any awkward telephone calls. So long as we can keep him away to-night—— Good-bye, Mrs. Verrell. Pray for success." Then he, too, was gone, and Bobbie was left alone.

Slowly the black of the night turned to grey, the grey to pearly pink, and then the sun dawned, and Bobbie knew she had failed. Blackshirt had not turned up, or if he had the fact was not known.

Marshall, too, had failed to return, and she was dimly uneasy, wondering whether Hepplewhaite had succeeded in turning the tables at the police-station.

She wanted to cry, but somehow the tears would not flow. She was numbed with despair. It would not be long before Hepplewhaite was set free, and

then—— She leaned wearily back in her chair and watched the sun rising higher into the blue heavens.

At seven o'clock Marshall returned. He came into the room, and as if it were a certain relief to her to be able to speak to someone of her troubles, suddenly the tears began to flow, and Bobbie buried her face in her handkerchief.

"Mr. Marshall. Richard did not come. We have lost—lost!" she sobbed.

Marshall laughed gladly. "No, not lost, Mrs. Verrell, but won. Blackshirt did come last night, and I followed him home."

"You know where he is staying?" Bobbie stared at the detective with wide-opened eyes.

He nodded, his face flushed with triumph. "Yes, at Wandsworth, not far from the Common."

"But—but—how did he come? I do not understand!" She gazed up at Marshall, her eyes pleading for explanation.

"Do you remember the Mullings murder?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Nor do I," he chuckled. "There never was such a case."

She did not understand. "But the constable who arrested Mr. Hepplewhaite knew it."

"Precisely!" and this time he laughed aloud.

At the sound of his mirth Bobbie realized the whole truth, just as though a brilliant light had been suddenly directed into a black patch.

"You mean Richard was—the police-constable." The humour of the situation entered into her soul, and she rocked with laughter. It was all so simple.

"And Hepplewhaite?" she asked presently.

Marshall turned his face away. "He escaped—conveniently."

But the fears for Blackshirt's future safety which filled Marshall with dread had no place in Bobbie's

thoughts. For the moment she was too ideally happy, too perfectly content.

"Oh, God! thank you," she whispered to herself. Then she turned to the detective. "And now for the reappearance of 'His Lady of the Phone,'" she smiled.

Marshall nodded. "The sooner the better," he said.

VERRELL'S forehead puckered into lines as he regarded the littered table. Too plainly it betrayed the fact that for once his facile pen was failing him. In every direction the room was strewn with pages torn from his writing-block, many displaying two or three lines only of his rather untidy handwriting. Each page was a fresh attempt on a new story, each leaf was evidence of another failure.

At the back of his brain simmered a story which bubbled and seethed for an outlet, and yet, despite his efforts, he could not strike an opening. It was to be the story of a broken romance, intermingling with the inevitable crime element from which his public would not let him escape, and, unlike most fiction, a confession of love was to begin instead of end the tale.

So his pencil hovered over the paper, while his brain pulled the strings and played the tune to the puppets of his imagination, but it seemed to him that in some way the cords were entangled, that somewhere in the music was a discord. His sentences were stilted, awkward or wrongly turned. His love passages were false, his characters were indeed—puppets.

For three days this opening had eluded him. It became increasingly vexing because the story was clearly plotted out in his mind.

What was the matter? Restlessness was not one of his failings as a general rule, but now he was conscious that something troubled him when he attempted to write of romance. It seemed as though he were endeavouring to write upon a subject of which he knew nothing.

His thoughts wandered. After all, he asked himself, was it surprising that he, to whom love was a stranger, should feel himself incapable of dealing with the situation?"

Unconsciously his lips drooped with the slightest suspicion of bitterness as his thoughts continued. What was his age? Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, or even, for all he knew, thirty. Thirty years of age, and he had not yet tasted the sweetness or the bitterness of love—and yet—— Once again he was troubled with unbidden thoughts; vague, misty recollections of holding a girl in his arms, of looking into her eyes, of his lips drawing nearer and nearer to hers——

He was conscious of a lonely feeling, as if something were missing from his life. Certainly, until he had found it necessary to flee for safety to Wandsworth he had owned a host of friends, yet in all that number there was not one to whom he could have confided the secret of his life, the darker side of his double existence. If only he had known someone who worshipped him, someone to whom he could have entrusted his secret, and opened his heart!

His roving eyes alighted upon a small miniature which held premier place of honour on the stained oak chest of drawers, and with an open mind, forgetting even that the picture was of one who was doing her best to trap him, he studied the tiny portrait from where he sat, and with a queer throb in the region of his heart, an emotion which seemed to affect his throat by causing an uncanny constriction, he imagined what life would really mean to him if the girl who peeped at him from the oval frame, were, instead of being his enemy, indeed his wife, his soul mate.

Why was she endeavouring to enmesh him in the toils of the law? There seemed to be no reason, unless, of course, it were for money. Yet, surely, the daughter of Sir Allen Dunn, she ought to possess sufficient for

her needs? Sir Allen Dunn! The name rang familiarly to his ears. So much so that he felt he must know the baronet.

"The devil take it!" he muttered to himself, "I seem to know everybody, and yet I know no one." He laughed shortly. "A paradox worthy of Gilbert. . . . Supposing he were really my father-in-law——"

He tried to wrench away his thoughts to some other subject, but the light was failing, there were dim, sombre, and mysterious shadows in the room, the very atmosphere was suggestive of romance. If only romance could, at his bidding, enter the door——

There was a knock.

"Yes," he called.

"A telegram for you, Mr. Thomson." The voice was that of Nellie Jones.

A telegram! He smiled slightly at the mistake which someone had evidently made. To the best of his knowledge there was not a soul who knew either his new name or his address, save one or two editors to whom he was submitting stories in order to alleviate any suspicions of him which his landlady might cherish in her breast. How, then, could there be anyone to send him a telegram?

"Come in," he said, and Nellie obeyed with alacrity, bearing the familiar, official envelope in her hand.

All at once the coincidence of her entry occurred to Verrell. Of what had he just been thinking? If romance could enter the room——

In the dim light he surveyed the girl with a new interest. A far-flung spray of orange light from the sinking sun had strayed across the doorway, illuminating and casting upon her more than a fair share of reflected glory, intensifying those charms which she possessed and glossing over her imperfection.

In an insipid way she was pretty. Her eyes were large and blue, inclined to seem a deeper hue than

they were because of the long, black eyelashes which swept over them, and which Nellie, aware of this fact, used to good purpose.

Her nose was uninteresting, but her lips were thicker than they should have been, revealing that beneath the girl's composure slumbered an, as yet, unawakened passion.

Favouring her, the shadows hid the fact that her hair —her pride—was so perfectly waved that it conveyed only a sense of artificiality, that her eyes, though pretty and lustrous, were in reality shallow and slightly vacuous.

For a moment, however, Verrell, affected by his loneliness, saw her in a prejudiced, favourable light, believed the gods had sent her in answer to his thoughts, and when he spoke to her his tone was warmer than Nellie had yet heard it.

"Surely you have made a mistake, Miss Jones. I cannot believe a telegram has come for me."

Her heart beat more rapidly at the sound of his voice, and she was acutely conscious of a change in him. Up to this moment she had sensed a barrier between them, a wall of reserve, of insularity, which she had been unable to beat down. Now, all of a sudden, it had vanished. Her eyes gleamed; it was an opportunity of which she would make the most.

"But your name is plainly written, and at this address," she said softly, and approaching nearer, passed him the telegram.

With a puzzled frown creasing his forehead he examined the envelope. It seemed undoubtedly intended for him.

Despite himself he felt a twinge of uneasiness as he inserted his finger and split open the envelope. He hastily spread out the paper. The words were few:

"Telephone immediately Park 00343."

Three times he read the telegram. "Telephone immediately Park 00343!" He laughed softly. It sounded more like an order than anything else—an order which, so far as he was concerned, was never likely to be obeyed——

His thoughts were interrupted by Nellie.

"Excuse me, Mr. Thomson, but is there any reply? The boy is still waiting."

Again he laughed. "There is no reply," he answered, and the emphasis in his voice invisibly underlined his words.

Nellie hesitated. If once she went downstairs there would be no other excuse to return, and she was clever enough to comprehend that the time appeared to be, as she mentally quoted to herself, "the psychological moment." There was something in the atmosphere of the room which radiated a suggestion of confidence, intimacy——

Going to the door she called down to her mother below: "Mother dear, tell the boy there is no answer." The faint echo of a chuckle was her reply, and, smilingly, she shut the door and ventured back into the middle of the room.

"Mercy me! Mr. Thomson, how untidy you are."

Verrell did not reply; he had not heard her speak, so engrossed was he in his thoughts. The telegram puzzled him more than he cared to admit. From whom could it be? Had it been a City number, or a Gerrard number he might have suspected an editor, though why an editor should want him so urgently he could not guess, but the number which he was told to telephone was a Park number, which meant that the unknown sender of the telegram lived in that neighbourhood from which he had lately fled—Notting Hill.

"Are all authors so oblivious when they are thinking out their stories?"

This time the words penetrated into Verrell's con-

sciousness, and he glanced up, startled. "I—I beg your pardon, Miss Jones?" he apologized, and he felt his cheeks warming. "I—I did not hear you speak to me. Won't you sit down?"

Desirous of compensating for his rudeness, Verrell rose from his seat and placed a chair ready for her, while Nellie, plucking nervously at the buttons of her dress, sat down. The rays of the sinking sun moved gradually up to the ceiling, leaving the lower part of the room in semi-gloom, so that the two who sat opposite became, to one another, vague shadows rather than substantial beings.

"Will you be cross with me if I ask you to repeat what you have just said? My thoughts were elsewhere. I was thinking——" He was about to add "of the telegram," but a streak of caution restrained him. Who the devil had sent it to him, anyway—no! he must forget it for the moment, otherwise his thoughts would wander once more.

"Of course you were, Mr. Thomson. It was mean of me to disturb you in the middle of your work. I must go." She half rose from her chair, while her lips muttered a prayer that he would stop her.

She need not have worried. "Please, please, Miss Jones, do not reproach yourself. Somehow to-day I have been unable to work. I am glad you came in, and now that you are here won't you please stop and talk to me for a little while?"

Nellie's lips curved into a little smile of triumph as she sat down again. If her mother could have heard her boarder say that!

"Why, I would love to, Mr. Thomson. I—have been feeling rather—rather lonely to-day." She caught in her breath with a tiny gasp, as she wondered whether she had been too daring.

"Have you?" he murmured sympathetically. "So have I. All this afternoon I have been unable to write.

The words would not come easily, and when I tried to force them they didn't ring true."

"Oh, what a shame! What were you writing about?"

He laughed. "Ridiculous, wasn't it, but I was trying to write of love."

"Why ridiculous?" she asked.

"Because I know nothing of it. I have never experienced it."

"Oh!" she gasped, a sudden feeling of elation overwhelming her. What he had said was indeed news to her, wonderful news! With her fresh mood she derived courage, coquetry. "Does a man learn of love only from experience, then, Mr. Thomson? A woman knows of it intuitively. I—I could tell you of—of—love." Out of the corners of her eyes she glanced at his face, but the fading light hid its expression from her.

At another time Verrell might have laughed at her suggestion, but, unsettled by his mood of the afternoon, he permitted himself to take her seriously. After all, there was a lot in what she said. Did not all women know when men were in love with them long before the men themselves were aware of the fact?

"Do you think you could teach me?" he asked softly.

Nellie could not speak for the sensation of victory which bubbled within her and welled into her throat. At last her chance! The baited hook which had so long failed to tempt a worthy fish had at last achieved a bite.

Tenderly she stretched out her hand and placed it on his knee. "Poor Mr. Thomson," she said, half whisperingly, "don't you know that love cannot be learned? It must be born in one naturally Love is not a history or geography lesson; it is something great, something too wonderful for words. When love holds sway in the hearts of men and women, there is no place

for any other emotion. I can tell you of love, but I cannot teach it to you, Mr. Thomson.

Even Verrell realized that if he had made one of his created characters speak so he would have torn up the page in disgust, but for the moment he was ready to forget her lack of subtlety in order to ponder on the pearl of wisdom which she had let fall from her lips.

He did not move her hand from his knee, though he could feel the warmth of it. Somehow it conveyed a suggestion of comfort, of human sympathy; it metaphorically represented a hand held out in friendship, just at a time when he was in need of it.

"Do you know, Miss Jones, your philosophy makes me uneasy. Do you mean that, supposing I never meet the right person, love will pass me by?"

She made haste to disprove his theory. "Oh no, Mr. Thomson, I did not mean that. A man can usually fall in love when he permits himself to."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, given the right envir—envie—if a man meets a nice woman often he is almost bound to love her in the end, unless he definitely makes up his mind the other way."

Quite innocently, and interested only in this study of a woman's doctrine, he said: "In other words, if you and I were to see very much of each other we might be mutually attracted?"

His frankness, unsuspected by her as such, intoxicated her. She believed that his words conveyed a hidden meaning. She leaned toward him so that her face was nearer to his. "Very likely, Mr. Thomson."

The scent of the pungent perfume with which she had sprayed herself mounted up to his nose, and his thoughts took a chaotic turn. Mutual attraction was not necessarily love, and he was lonely——

"Miss Jones," he muttered hoarsely, "who knows

but that, despite what you say, you will be able to teach me what love is." Impulsively his arms quivered to stretch out; it was in his mind to take her hand within his, but the idea moved and joggled his memory, pulling its cords so that for a brief, passing flash he pictured himself in a similar scene. It as quickly dispersed, but it was sufficient to cool his blood, and he dropped back into his chair.

Nellie could have cried with disappointment, but she was sensible enough to realize that there might be many more failures yet before she landed her fish. None knew better than she that Verrell's lapse into sentiment was but a passing phase, that her part was to see that it became more permanent.

"If I do, will you be able to write more easily?" Cunningly she veered the conversation round to his work.

"I should be a fool if I didn't. Even now I feel more capable of continuing the yarn." He spoke nothing but the truth. The urge to write seized hold of him; he felt the next time he took pencil in hand to finish his story the tale would unfold itself. A hint of eagerness crept into his voice, but the idea did not appeal to Nellie. She was not yet ready to accept dismissal.

"You are tired, Mr. Thomson. You must not work any more to-day. It is very bad to force your brain, you know. I have got to go out for mother. Would—would you care to come with me? The fresh air will clear the cobwebs from your mind, and perhaps when you come back you will be able to carry on. We will cross the Common; it will be quiet and restful for you, so few people will be about."

Even had he wished, he could scarcely have refused; as it happened, the suggestion appealed to him. He had an inclination to walk in the dusk.

"Jolly fine idea," he said gaily, and jumped up

from his chair. "Run along, Miss Jones, slip on a hat, and we will toddle along."

In less than five minutes they were strolling across the Common, Verrell little realizing that not far off was the spot where he had changed into his Blackshirt clothes preparatory to recovering Bobbie's letters from the unknown blackmailer.

Nellie was quiet, afraid to speak lest she should break the spell, while Verrell's thoughts reverted to the telegram which he had temporarily forgotten. The more he dwelt upon it, the more the mystery of it deepened. Assuming that it were not sent from an editorial office—and he would cheerfully have bet ten to one that it wasn't—he failed to place from whom it could have emanated. Now that he had time to think things over he began to realize that the curt order spelled danger.

That it was such now became apparent. The word "please" would not have cost an extra penny, for the telegram contained well under the dozen words allowed. Then, too, he was puzzled at the lack of signature.

Slowly the mystery of the telegram intrigued him; curiosity battled with caution. Who had sent it? Obviously that was a point he would solve by obeying the summons, but he did not intend to do that.

"You are very quiet?" Nellie had reached the end of her tether; she felt that she could no longer remain silent.

"Not more than you," he replied.

"I did not wish to disturb your thoughts in case you were thinking of your next story."

"That was rather nice of you. Not everyone is so considerate." Naïvely believing her, he was rather pleased that she was sensible enough to disregard her own desires for the sake of his work, and he began to wonder why he had, hitherto, been so unfavourably impressed by her. He had thought of her as rather a

shallow, egotistical, and self-possessed young female, whereas he was discovering that she was sympathetic and thoughtful, perhaps a trifle shy.

They came to a lamp-post, which threw out a circle of illumination. As they passed by a man detached himself from the surrounding shadows and darted toward Nellie.

"Why, hullo, Nellie!" he called out with a glad cry. "I never thought I was going to see you to-night. Can you come——"

Then, as he realized that another man was already accompanying her, he stopped short.

Nellie bit her lip. John Williams had been her stand-by for the last eighteen months, but though he had proposed marriage to her she had refused him, hoping that before long someone in a better position would speak to her in similar terms. Now that the prospect was brighter than it had ever been, she wanted nothing to do with him—at any rate, for the time being. John was a last hope only; she could not see herself employing a maid and owning a small car on three pounds fifteen shillings a week which he drew as a tobacconist's assistant.

"I am sorry, John," she said coldly, "I cannot come out with you to-night. I am shopping for mother, and this gentleman is escorting me." She emphasized the word "gentleman," and Verrell smiled to himself.

Not so the other man. With a keen look, he eyed Verrell, then, without a word, disappeared into the darkness again.

Nellie giggled nervously. "He will hang around me so! Poor John!" she concluded pityingly.

At length they reached Clapham Junction, and if the route that Nellie had chosen was more circuitous than it need have been, Verrell did not know, nor would he have cared had he been aware of it. The air seemed so keen, so healthy and invigorating, that he enjoyed

every breath that he drew into his lungs, and was sorry that he could not keep on and on.

"You will wait for me here? I shall not be very long!" Nellie did not want him to accompany her. In some of the shops she could buy at wholesale rates, and she was afraid he might not think it "genteel," as she named it to herself.

She disappeared into a maze of shoppers, all of whom were busily eager to conclude their purchases before closing time, so Verrell was left to survey the animated scene with an eager eye, for crowds always interested him. There were so many types and studies, pictures and scenes to be stored away in his memory cells, in due course to be transferred to paper.

His gaze wandered to the shops which stretched away on either side of the road as far as his eye could see. Every kind of shop—butchers, bakers, hairdressers, general drapers, provision merchants, and, behind him, a tobacconist and a post office.

Post office! The words automatically suggested the telephone, and his mind reverted once again to the telegram. Danger or no danger, he was curious concerning it; one minute on the telephone would give him all the information he required. His eyes rested lingeringly on the public call-box. There would be just enough time before Nellie returned.

Danger! What rot! Where was there any danger? If the name on the telegram had been Verrell—or Blackshirt——

Another reason for the message flashingly leaped into his mind. Supposing somebody wanted to warn him of danger! At last the excuse he needed! Without any further hesitation he entered the post office and stepped into the telephone booth.

"Park 00343." He was sure the girl repeated the correct number, but somehow or other he was switched on to the wrong exchange. Once again he tried.

This time a woman's voice answered him.

"Hullo!"

"Hullo!" he repeated. "Is that Park 00343?"

There was a pause at the other end; then slowly he heard: "Yes, Park 00343. Who is this?"

Verrell frowned. The girl must have made another mistake. The person at the other end was obviously an American from the United States, and as far as he could remember he had not met any Americans for a long time.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I am afraid I must be on a wrong number. Did you say Park 00343?"

"Sure I did, but who are you?"

"Well, madam, I do not think my name means much to you, but it happens to be Thomson."

"Ah!" He distinctly heard the exclamation. "Mr. Thomson! You received my telegram, then?"

"Your telegram?" So there was no mistake! "It was you who sent me a message asking me to ring up Park 00343?"

"It was."

"Well?"

The woman at the other end laughed softly. "I am glad you have obeyed me so promptly. You have made a good start."

Verrell choked. "Obeyed you? Well I'm hanged! If that is your idea, this is where I ring off."

"I think not, Mr. Verrell," she replied evenly.

Instantly he was coldly calm. His intuition had not played him false. There was danger after all. "I do not understand!" he said.

"No? Well now, isn't that too bad, Mr. Richard Verrell? You had better put on your thinking cap real quick, for you have a hundred per cent. jolt coming to you. Are you listening?"

Was he listening? The question struck him as humorous, but he was not ready to give in without a fight. "I have not rung off yet."

"*La, la!* So now you are Mr. Diplomat." Suddenly she laughed, a happy, infectious laugh which echoed like the tinkle of fairy bells. "Are you fond of life—and liberty?"

The question rang significantly in his ears. Liberty! Good Gad! what did she mean? What more did she know of him, this unknown American woman? If she had connected up Thomson and Verrell—an eventuality which he had reckoned impossible—was it so unlikely that she might be aware that Verrell the novelist was Blackshirt the criminal?

His eyes flickered slightly, but his voice was still calm when he replied. "I am sorry, but I do not understand you. Of course, everyone loves liberty, but why should you ask me that question?"

"Because, Mr. Verrell, unless you do all that I order you in the future, you will not know what liberty means for many a year."

He laughed scornfully. "I do not know who you are——"

"I do not intend you should," she interrupted.

"I do not know who you are," he repeated firmly, "nor does it really interest me. Without wishing to appear discourteous to such a charming lady, I venture to suggest that you have been dipping too frequently into the pages of Grimm or Andersen. Your imagination, madam, is evidently running riot. My name is Thomson, and"—he laughed at the concealed point of the joke—"neither you nor anyone else in the world can prove otherwise."

Bobbie felt the tears spring into her eyes, but for his sake she dared not weaken, even at the pathetic truth of his words. "Such sarcasm!" she twitted lightly; then her voice hardened. "Now let us take off the foils, Mr. Verrell, *alias* Mr. Thomson, *alias*—Blackshirt!"

With a ghastly feeling of emptiness round his heart,

Blackshirt heard the words he had feared were to come. His identity was a secret no longer; somewhere in London was someone who knew, not only that Verrell was Blackshirt, but also that he was Thomson. He was defenceless in the hands of a woman to whom he had just spoken for the first time in his life.

What else did she know? Then, he asked himself, what more did she require to know? Was she not already sufficiently acquainted with his double life to set the human bloodhounds of the Yard on his track?

He closed his eyes in mental agony, and was oblivious, for the moment, to where he was, but he was not long allowed to forget. As though she were standing by his side, he heard her voice, through the earpiece, clamouring for a reply from him.

"Hullo! Hullo!" And then once again: "Hullo! Hullo! Why don't you answer me? Are you still on the line?"

"Yes, yes," he answered wearily, "what do you want?"

"I want you, firstly, to admit your name."

"And if I do not?"

"Then I shall drop a line to the *Evening Star*. The editor seems more or less anxious to know more of you."

He knew he could not meet her attack. He was in her hands, for her to do with him as she pleased. It was a horrible feeling, and he compared himself to a fly entangled in a web and watching the approach of a spider. A rage, bred suddenly of his helplessness, took root within him against the woman at the other end of the line; he realized that for the second time in his life he hated a human being. In such a way had he loathed his cruel foster-father, who had beaten and forced him into a life of crime. In such a way had he also hated his besotted foster-mother, who had spent half her time, when she was not senseless in a drunken stupor, in thrashing him and using revolting language

which, even in those far-off days, had sickened him with its vileness.

What matter that the mysterious woman who threatened him owned the loveliest voice he had ever heard, what matter that the sound if her gay laugh still lingered in his memory? She was a danger to him; she represented a threat to his liberty, which suddenly seemed by contrast so much sweeter.

Surging hatred was not the only emotion which took prominent place within his chaotic thought; once again he felt the old joy of battle, the urge to fight, the lust for adventure, that same propelling force which had kept him a criminal for so many years after the necessity for it no longer existed.

A new adversary had joined the ranks of his opponents; now he had not only to fend off the groping attacks of the Scotland Yard men, steer clear of the clutching grasp of the *Evening Star*, but to circumvent the intentions, whatever they might be, of a more dangerous enemy—a woman—and one who, unfortunately, possessed far more knowledge concerning him than was pleasant.

Nevertheless his eyes sparkled, and a deep gurgling laugh rolled up from his heart. The greater the odds against him the greater the triumph if he won. In the meantime he must match his subtlety against her advantage, his cunning against her wiles.

"Well!" Once again the voice came through impatiently, "do you admit being whom I said, or not?"

"Supposing I say 'yes'?" he asked, and thus did history repeat itself, for such were the very words he had used once before in reply to the self-same question.

"Good!" she remarked cheerfully, "that bluff nonsense cuts no ice with us Yankees, you know."

"No!" Metaphorically he shrugged his shoulders. She would find out to the contrary—in good time.

"No," she echoed firmly, gathering his thoughts

from the expression of his voice, "and now to business. In consideration of my remaining quiet as to your double, or should I say triple, personality, you will, in future, do nothing else but carry out such orders as I may give you to do. Nor must you, at any time, 'crack a crib' or undertake any job whatsoever before informing me of the fact and receiving my O.K. to it. Is that quite clear?"

"As a window-pane," he answered. "And do you expect me to agree to such a ridiculous suggestion?"

"Tut, tut! Mr. Blackshirt. That sounded as though you were quite angry with me. You mustn't be, you know. I mean well! Beside, if you don't like it now what will happen later on?"

"Would it be indiscreet of me to inquire just what you imagine yourself to be in this—er—splendid, new game? Are you requiring a pet slave, do you wish to become my accomplice, or are you endeavouring to reform me?"

"That is my business," she answered sharply.

"I am sorry," he said ironically. "I had a faint idea it was mine, too."

Bobbie at the other end of the wire smiled happily to herself. Every moment she listened to his voice was Paradise, and her joy was intensified by the fact that as far as she could judge he had not changed since those days, not long ago, when she had been his "Lady of the Phone." Though that time was now, by a freakish throw of Fate's dice, beyond his memory, in hers it was still radiantly fresh and vivid.

Evidently he still faced danger with his dare-devil flaunting courage, and mocked at the threatening peril of exposure. In no way was he different save for the blank in his mind, and so she convinced herself that it would be only a matter of time before she would win his heart again.

In the meantime she had a part to play.

"Well, if you must know, I intend to have the pleasure of becoming your side-kick, your accomplice, your mate, or whatever you would rather call me."

Blackshirt's eyes narrowed. He was puzzled, and because of it, alarmed. What was her game? To his prejudiced idea her words spelled trickery, treachery.

"What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

"Simply that to-morrow night it will be necessary for me to commit a burglary. By myself I should not have the faintest hope of ever succeeding, but with the help of Black— a certain person of whom we both know so well, the matter will be just plumb simple.

Verrell laughed. "It sounds as though I were to become your accomplice rather than the other way round."

"It makes no difference. Now listen——"

"To what?" he interrupted.

"To your instructions."

"But I have not agreed to carry them out."

"It is not necessary. You will do what I say, or——"

Or! Blackshirt bit his lips in despair. There was no need to ask what was represented by the word "or." Unless he did as his unknown telephonist commanded, he was likely to see the inside of a prison. There seemed no other alternative. He must obey—or——

He clenched his free hand desperately in an effort to crush down his seething fury. Surely—surely there was something he could do instead of helplessly listening to orders which represented moral blackmail. He might have been a child standing fearfully before his teacher. But what was there he could do?

He was deep in the spider's web; every exit was barred by silken threads. Threads! He laughed bitterly. "Threats" was the right word.

"Fight! Fight!" A small voice gibbered at him, taunting and sneering at his inaction. "Fight!" it

said, but a louder voice boomingly replied, "You cannot," and dully he came to realize that there was nothing he could do, no way of hitting back.

"Continue," he said bitterly.

"Thank you so much! You're sure a sensible man. I guess you are the right man, too, in the right place. You know Chiswick?"

"I have been through it on my way to the boat race."

"Well now, ain't that grand, as we say in little old New York. Listen! Somewhere in that little town is a vaudeville hall, the Palliadrome, I believe it is called. So long as you keep in the main street you cannot miss it. Right next door is another building, a block of local offices. For some mysterious reason the architect has built only one window at the back, which is unfortunate for you, for you will have to get in by it."

"When you have duly entered, wait in the room in which you will find yourself. At ten o'clock I will join you, when I shall give you further instructions. Don't forget, that's a date; ten o'clock to-morrow night."

"Is that all?"

"I think so," she answered sweetly, "except——"

"Ha! I was afraid so. Except——" He was heavily sarcastic.

"Don't forget to bring some tools to help you open a safe." Suddenly she lowered her voice to a whisper so that he scarcely caught the sound of the words. "Good-night, Blackshirt," and then the echo of a click warned him that she had disconnected.

So sure was she that he would obey her wishes! She did not wait for his "aye" or "nay." Just his orders and then—good-night.

The bustle of the streets seemed unreal when he left the telephone booth and merged into the crowd of shoppers again, for his telephone conversation had left

him with the impression that he had been dreaming. If the idea had not seemed utterly absurd, he would have pinched his arm in order to assure himself that he was real, that the last few minutes had not been part of a nightmare, though in all fairness he had to admit that the voice had been that of a charming girl, for despite the slanginess of her style of speech, somehow he had gained the notion that she was educated, cultured.

Automatically he walked homeward, instinct guiding his way. It was not for five minutes that, suddenly, he recollected Nellie. Though he did not realize it, he frowned slightly as he turned back, for companionship had become distasteful to him. He wanted to think, to give way to the thoughts which besieged him, to form a plan whereby he could defeat the machinations of the persistent girl on the phone.

Fortunately, Nellie had not returned to the rendezvous, though less than a minute afterward she was beside him.

"There, haven't I been a quick girl," she simpered, "all that shopping done in less than ten minutes. Have you missed me?"

"You would be surprised to know how much," he answered.

* * * * *

From afar off Verrell saw the brilliant lights of the Palliadrome, casting a halo of illumination around the music-hall, so that even the sky reflected back the vivid colouring.

In flashing, scintillating letters of fire, the names of the "star" performers were blazoned to the world . . . "The Houston Sisters" . . . "Noni and Horace" . . . "Ethel Hook."

As Verrell drew nearer he realized how justified was the management in booking the people's favourite artists. The "House Full" boards, significantly dis-

played at each entrance, told their own tale, and through the exit doors, left ajar, sounds of deep-throated laughter rolled out to him in waves.

He casually studied the numerous announcement boards advertising the following week's programme, and the photographs of the performers, but actually he was interested in neither, for under the cover of his hat, for once a grey, velour felt, instead of his usual gibus, he carefully studied the main road, which, so far as he could discover, stretched away on each side without any dissecting road.

On one side of the Palliadrome, and attached to it, was the block of offices into which he must enter. Beyond that were shops, just as there were on the other side of the music-hall.

Blackshirt smiled to himself. Fortunate there being a window at the back! To have broken in through the front would have been impossible in the full publicity of the main road. In the meantime the question which troubled him was how to get to the rear of the two buildings. There was certainly an alley-way beside the Palliadrome, on the opposite side of the offices, but when he glanced down it he could see, at the end, only a very high wall. Significantly, he saw, also, that in the same alley-way were the tall doors, some twenty feet or so in height, through which the scenery was passed to the stage. From that fact he deduced that there was evidently no entrance at the back.

He realized he must strike either one way or the other until he came to a cross-road, by which he anticipated gaining a parallel road, from which to approach his objective. Strange to the neighbourhood he knew not which way to turn, and was too cautious to ask, so chancing his luck turned to his left.

He walked for nearly half a mile before reaching a cross-road, but in doing so he suddenly realized the reason, and chuckled softly in triumph, for he was

gazing down upon the embankment of the District Railway, and it was on to this that a large part of the street backed.

Above him he saw a station, and, a short way along, its entrance. There was the way open to him to get on the embankment, so he purchased a ticket to the next station, and made his way to the platform where he walked toward the end. There the lights were fewer, and he was pleased to note that where the platform sloped down to a footpath beside the rail it was in deep shadow.

For the moment there were too many people about, so he waited, seeing in the distance the lights of a train rapidly approaching. With a muffled clangour it slid into the station. In less than a minute it was away again, and the platform clear. With one final glance to see that he was apparently unobserved he slipped down the slope, and the next moment was hidden in the blackness of the railway embankment.

The night had darkened considerably since he had set forth from Wandsworth, a heavy bank of storm-clouds having approached from the west. This was all to his advantage; nothing could have suited him better. So dark was it, in fact, that he could scarcely see in front of him, but his sensitive outstretched fingers warned him of obstacles to be avoided.

Here and there lights gleamed dully from curtained windows of the buildings on his right, but the night was too dense for any fugitive rays of light to reach him. All he had to fear was that the trains which thundered past would reveal him in their momentary circle of light, so, taking no risks, he flattened himself each time on the ground, carefully keeping his face turned away.

Thus he worked his way along the grassy banks of the railway till a large square of unrelieved darkness warned him that he had reached the offices.

He had now arrived at the most difficult part of his task. Somewhere in the large expanse of wall was a window. Looking up he could neither see it nor anything of its adjacent wall. How he was to reach it he could not surmise, but he carefully felt along the bottom of the building hoping against hope that somewhere or other he would find a convenient drain-pipe, a method of escalading which he had found so useful in the past.

After a distance which he judged to be about twenty feet along from the point at which he had started, he found what he wanted, and smiled happily to himself. Even if the window were nowhere near it, and it was too much to hope that it would be, at least he would be able to reach the roof of the offices by means of it. Once there—he shrugged his shoulders. Time enough to think of that later.

He eased his muscles for the commencement of the climb, but even as he did so he heard the rumble of a train. He waited; as it swung past he saw, dimly, its reflection about thirty-five feet or more up the wall. The window!

With an agile spring he started upward. With his toes pressing well into the space between the pipe and the wall, and his hands gripping the metal, he advanced foot by foot. Up and up until he believed that he was on a level with the window, though he could not see it.

Once again a train came to his assistance. With a thrill of satisfaction he noted that the window was another three feet up, and would be just within reach. Another advance upward and then, taking a firm hold, he stretched out his right arm. He had not misjudged the distance. His finger-tips rubbed glass.

Next came the question of prizing it open. He played his fingers up and down till he found the division. As he expected, it was latched, but in his pocket, where he had placed it ready before climbing, was a small

metal instrument, which noiselessly unfastened the clasp, and he was able to slide the upper half of the window down.

So far his work had been easy, but now he had a delicate athletic feat to perform—namely, to swing from the drain-pipe to the window. With his right hand he clutched the window with a steadfast grip, and then let go. His body dropped, but his arm, though it was cruelly jerked, was strong enough to hold his weight, and he swung to and fro. After that it was simple to haul himself upward until he stood on the slight sill.

Inside the room was pitch dark, not the slightest gleam of any illumination whatsoever to be glimpsed. This was where he was to await the coming of the Girl on the Phone, as he called her to himself. In vain had he endeavoured to find a feasible scheme to circumvent this meeting, and in the end had to admit himself half conquered; but only that much. His idea was to await events, and to be prepared to twist them to his own advantage.

He was not uneasy, though suspicious and ready for all emergencies; he carried himself defensively, his limbs ready to act in concert with his brain.

First, however, he wished to acquaint himself with the geography of the room. He took off his hat and overcoat, unwound his scarf, and placed the whole in a neat pile by the window. Next he adjusted his black mask, and stood dressed in his black clothes—Blackshirt, the criminal.

Once ready, he commenced to cross the room to discover on which side was the door. As before, when proceeding along the embankment, he used his fingers as his eyes. He was never afraid he would knock anything over, his fingers were too sensitive, the faintest touch communicating itself to his nerve centre.

He came to a chair in front of what he believed to be

a desk, and skirted round it. Then came a clear space, and he stepped forward with a steady step. Three, four paces—then without warning, a door behind him flew open with a violent jerk, and, catching him on the back of the head, sent him sprawling to the floor, right into the stream of light admitted by the open door.

"Wot the blinking 'ell!"

Blackshirt was conscious that a man was framed in the doorway. More quickly than the thought which travelled from his bewildered brain ordering him to escape, he automatically scrambled to his feet and darted for the window. He might have been out and down the drain-pipe before the intruder had moved, but for once Fate was against him. Something entangled itself in his feet, there was a dismal squeal of pain from the cat which had darted into his way, and for the second time Blackshirt went to the ground, his head cracking against the desk, so that an excruciating pain shot through his head.

It needed no special intelligence to guess the truth, and the man at the door did not hesitate. With a semi-jump he flung himself forward on top of Blackshirt, and the next moment the two men were engaged in a struggle; Blackshirt for liberty, the other man for the sensational triumph of having captured a burglar single-handed.

Ordinarily, the fight would have been of short duration, but Blackshirt was almost helpless. The weight of his opponent on his chest left him gasping for breath, the pain of his head confused him so that he could not guard against the heavy punches which the other man launched at his head, and which glanced off Blackshirt's jaw with a dull thud.

Blackshirt felt himself weakening under the attack, but his spirit blazed up. Exerting his remaining strength he shot out his arms and heaved the man over.

They were up practically together, and with a despairing throb Blackshirt noticed that his exit to the window was barred; that there was only one thing he could do. Like a coward he must run for it, and so he turned on his heel and darted for the door into a blinding light.

Dazzled by its glare, he could see nothing, but he dared not stop, for there was a roar of rage behind him, and he knew that the other man was after him. He ran forward again, and suddenly became aware that the place was a mass of ropes and wires, which seemed to twist and turn in every direction. Just in time he veered to one side, and so saved his face from a taut wire, but in doing so tripped and pitchforked into space.

In that second he was conscious of a medley of varied sensations. There was a sickening pit of emptiness in his stomach, a noise of rolling thunder, the wailing of music. Then he landed; down, down, then up again, twisting and twirling in the air. He believed himself mad; his limbs lost all power of control; helplessly they flopped up and around him. Then again he fell; again he landed on something soft and springy; then up into the air again, turning more unwilling somersaults till at last he was lying still on what seemed to be a gently swaying surface of rough canvas.

The noise was deafening, the light painful, and still it seemed to him that he heard music. He gazed to one side; with a pang he believed there was no longer room for doubt, that his mind had given way. He was lying in the middle of what seemed a glorious woody park which stretched away in the distance to where he could see cool mountain-tops.

Perhaps he was in Paradise; the music, celestial? The——

"You blinking fool, wot the Hades are you doing?"

His brain cleared at the sound of a human voice, and

Blackshirt sat up. Two clowns gazed at him with beatific faces, belied by blazing, furious eyes.

Clowns! He rubbed his eyes, and then the truth burst upon him in all its reality. What had happened, how he got there, he did not know, but—he was sitting up on a spring mattress and occupying the centre of the Palliadrome stage.

The scene was grotesque; the members of the audience, believing it all part of the show, roared approval and clamoured for the suddenly appeared third member of the family of the Gimcrack Brothers, the "make-you-laugh" acrobats, to continue.

Vaudeville artists on the boards are quick thinkers by force of circumstances, their brains alert at all times for a ready "gag," their wits work with lightning rapidity. One of the Gimcrack Brothers, to turn the unforeseen occurrence from appearing such, advanced to the footlights and held up his hand for silence.

"That's Jim, our nephew," he announced. "He wants to propose to his best girl, so he's practising being kicked down the stairs by papa." A fresh roar of laughter resounded through the theatre, and under cover the clown hissed to his brother:

"Clear that fool off the stage before he crabs our act."

Blackshirt gazed to the wings. On all sides had clustered stage hands and artistes, and foremost in the group the furious, gesticulating stage-manager.

"Come off, you fool, come off," he yelled frantically.

Meanwhile the clown was continuing: "A bright young spark, Jim. Got a mask on so his girl shouldn't see his face and faint dead on the spot. What's he got black on for? That's to attend his own funeral after papa's finished with him. Poor Jim!" The clown wept. "Such a bright young spark. Just the sort to set the coals on fire when he dies."

The people were in a ripe mood for idiocy, and if

Gimcrack's words were not very funny his actions were excruciatingly so, and the house rocked.

Not so Blackshirt. In the wings the man with whom he had lately fought was talking to the stage-manager. There was a bustle from the back of the surrounding group, a hint of blue. He was trapped, surrounded by hostile men in every direction, one amongst thousands! To him it was tragedy, and the people on the other side of the footlights laughed until the noise was overpowering.

One thing only was there in his favour. Rather than interrupt the show, the men behind the scenes would wait for him to come off, but once in the wings it would be the end of Blackshirt!

Desperately he gazed upward, but there was no hope. He could not scale scenery, and, looking in front again, he saw, even through the fierce glare of the footlights, the theatre attendants lining up behind the orchestra.

As if his uneasiness was radiated into the atmosphere, the laughter of the amusement-seekers died down, and there was comparative silence. In that minute there was an excited yell from a man in the gallery.

"Garn, mates, they're spoofin' us. That ain't no Gimcrack brother. Look at his black clothes. That's Blackshirt, the gentleman crook!" It was a man who had been one of the guards at Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot's garden-party.

The orchestra tailed off till the silence was acute, and with a roar like the bursting of a dam the audience shrieked the word "Blackshirt!" They arose *en masse* in their excitement, and at that moment Blackshirt stood up on the spring mattress. He swayed unsteadily, then he jumped. Ten feet up he had just noticed the end of a rope, possibly pulled down by him when he had fallen. If he could reach it . . . .

Reading his thoughts, the Gimcrack brothers darted forward, but even as they reached the mattress Black-

shirt came down for the second time on the spring. He bent his knees and swayed his arms, and his lithe body sailed upward toward the rope.

For one second he thought he had missed it, and his heart sank; then his grasping hand clutched it tightly, and he swung in mid-air. Only for a second; then he was up the rope, hand over hand, till he disappeared from the sight of the audience.

Two men were there ready for him, but they were no match for Blackshirt. With an easy jump to the side he avoided them, and the next moment was past and heading for the little office wherein he had entered.

From the auditorium he heard a yell. "Go it, Gimcracks, catch the blighter," and knew that, as he had anticipated, the acrobats were after him. With one throw his clothes were out of the window, and just as the brothers entered the room he jumped for the drain-pipe and started his downward descent.

Halfway down he looked up and saw the flash of an electric torch; then felt the piping shake, and knew he was being followed. For the sake of quickness he dropped, and, though he landed on his feet, the force of the fall tumbled him over. His groping hands found his hat and coat; then he rose to his feet, and as he did so heard the thud of feet. One of the Gimcracks had followed him.

It was still pitch dark, but the acrobat must have felt Blackshirt as he landed, for he made a wild grab and caught the coat, but Blackshirt tugged it from his grasp, and with choking breath climbed unsteadily up the side of the embankment.

The rails were humming, round the bend he saw the lights of a train rushing toward him. A few steps more and he would be safe, but Gimcrack was behind him, nearly on his ankles.

Two yards more. . . . Somehow he clambered up, but the train seemed almost on him, its front lights

gleaming down as from a terrifying height. He jumped heavily, missing the live rail by a miracle, and dashed frantically on as the train swished past with a roar and a rushing cyclone of wind.

By the time Gimcrack had given up the search, Blackshirt had joined the crowd gathered round the front entrance of the theatre and was cheerfully listening to a garbled account of his own misdeeds from one of the attendants.

* * * * *

Little knowing what had happened in the building next door, Bobbie waited until one o'clock before she gave up her plan as useless and went home again.

She cried herself to sleep that night, believing in her heart that Blackshirt had failed her.

"GOOD-MORNING."

"Good-morning, sir."

"This is Mr. Richard Verrell's apartment, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"And—er—you?"

"I am Mr. Verrell's valet, sir."

"Good! Then you are just the man with whom I would like to talk for a little while." Hepplewhaite glanced pointedly within.

"With me, sir?" Roberts's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Very good, sir. Will you please step inside?"

Hepplewhaite entered, and, obeying the motion of Roberts's hand, sat down in the comfortable lounge chair which occupied the largest part of the small hall.

"Well now, Mr.——?" he looked up inquiringly.

"Roberts, sir."

"—Mr. Roberts, I am Hepplewhaite, of the *Evening Star*. My chief wants to rake up that burglary again. He thinks it is too good to let drop, so he has sent me along to try and unearth more details of it. Do you think you can help me?"

The valet shrugged his shoulders. "I have already told all I know to the police—several times."

Hepplewhaite looked steadily at him. "But is there nothing which you have not reported to the police?"

For any change of expression which he could catch, Hepplewhaite might have been looking into the face of a Chinaman.

"No, sir," Roberts replied evenly. Yet, though to all intents and purposes the reporter's strange question

had left the other man undisturbed, in reality this was far from being the truth. There had been an elusive quality in the voice of the visitor which left Roberts acutely uneasy. He tried to define its undercurrent, but it was not so much suspicion, or knowledge, or even uncertainty, but rather an admixture of all three.

Whatever it may have been, Roberts smelled danger, and with this consciousness was fully revived the inherent distrust of the world, habitual to the natural-born criminal. He felt all the old cunning rising up in his breast, the same old hatred of questions, the same old reluctance to answer them.

It was strange! He had thought the sensations of those days buried with his past; instead it seemed they had been merely slumbering. Danger! Not to himself, but to his beloved master; danger which must be met and defeated. So, even before Hepplewhaite betrayed himself as such, he became, in Roberts's mind, a prospective enemy.

Hepplewhaite was not disappointed in his reply; he had expected none other.

"Of course," he said genially, "I am not trying to make out that you have suppressed information which might be of use to the police in tracking the burglar. What I am after is this: The *Evening Star* looks at the burglary in a different light. It is the humour of it which we want to publish. Is there any twist, anything unusual in the theft which might cause our readers to chuckle?"

"The whole burglary was unusual, sir," Roberts replied.

"Yes, yes, I know that," Hepplewhaite said impatiently. "Let me explain more fully what I mean. According to what you told the other reporter on the *Evening Star*, the man who broke into Mr. Verrell's safe stole a number of criminal relics which Mr. Verrell, as a very enthusiastic criminologist, had collected.

"That in itself, of course, is a good joke, but don't you think the situation would be still more humorous if those relics had been stolen by the very criminal with whom they were connected? You see what I mean?"

"I am sure, sir, your readers would thoroughly enjoy such a novel rendering of a commonplace theft."

Hepplewhaite eyed the valet sharply. The man's voice was not at all sarcastic, but——

"What do you mean, commonplace?" he asked.

"Why, sir, surely you know that the particular relics which disappeared were all tools connected with different crimes, which, in the hands of the right man, would be more than useful."

Hepplewhaite frowned. "How do you mean?"

"If I may be excused being personal, sir, if you was a professional cracksman and came across a very useful drill, for instance, of the kind which goes through the toughest steel as though it was butter, would you not help yourself to it?"

"Oh!" Hepplewhaite was nonplussed. This was a viewpoint which had not occurred to him before. At the same time he was not going to acknowledge himself beaten quite so early in the game. "Why did you not mention that before?"

Roberts smiled. "I did, sir, but it was much too ordinary an explanation to appeal to you reporters, sir."

Hepplewhaite began to dislike the obsequious valet. It was very much as though the man spoke with his tongue in his cheek the whole time.

"I'm not so sure they were not right," he said shortly. "Anyway, what does Mr. Verrell say about it?"

"Mr. Verrell agrees with my theory."

Hepplewhaite's eyes flared with triumph, but he kept his face away from Roberts, and his voice even.

"So that is what he says. I wonder why?"

"Not 'says,' sir," Roberts interrupted smoothly, "but 'writes!'"

The reporter clenched his hands to restrain himself betraying his annoyance. He felt as if he were being played with, as if he were up against a man as sharp, if not sharper, than himself.

"You have heard, then, so soon? I thought the papers reported Mr. Verrell in Switzerland?"

"You forget the Continental edition of our papers, Mr. Hepplewhaite."

To gain time Hepplewhaite lit a cigarette. When it was well alight he looked up again at Roberts, who still stood before him, waiting patiently.

"Would you mind letting me see that letter? An extract from it would be the very thing for our Sunday edition."

"The letter was not sent to me, sir, but to madam. You must apply to Mrs. Verrell for it."

"Humph! We do not wish to worry Mrs. Verrell. I know what would be better. Give me the name of Mr. Verrell's hotel, and we can telegraph our Lucerne correspondent to interview him."

"I am sorry, sir, but Mr. Verrell expressly asked in the same letter that his address should not be given to any reporters. Apparently he foresaw what might happen."

Beneath his breath Hepplewhaite cursed. Far from having achieved success by his call at Verrell's apartment, he had lost ground. The valet's words rang so easily they carried conviction; certain pet theories which had lately occurred to him were smashed to pieces.

He felt if he stopped much longer he would rise up in his fury and attempt to throttle the valet. With a jerk he rose to his feet.

"A little thing like that doesn't worry the Press

much," he sneered. "We have got at more famous people than he before now."

Roberts opened the door. "Very good, sir. I will inform him of that, sir."

Hepplewhaite walked toward the park with a set, white face. His final remark had been cheap, vulgar, and unworthy of him, and the fact that he realized it too well only served to increase the intensity of his fury. Beside having, for once, behaved rudely, he had also forewarned Verrell's valet of his intentions.

He walked through the park, his chaotic emotions gradually calming down. As his anger subsided, his determination strengthened to track down the faint clue which seemed to lead to the solution of Blackshirt's identity. True, at the moment it only consisted of a collaboration of circumstances which suggested to him a preposterous theory, but nevertheless, it was one to be sifted to the bottom before being thrown aside as worthless. He had too much at stake to overlook the smallest idea; arrest Blackshirt he must, or go to the wall.

In his mind he went over once more his recent conversation with Roberts, but, whichever way he looked, was forced to admit that the valet had said nothing upon which he might work. All the same, he could not dismiss Roberts from his mind; the man intrigued him; gradually the belief was born in his mind that the face was vaguely familiar. He tried to thrust the suggestion aside, realizing that the average brain can hypnotize itself into believing anything. But the seed of suspicion had been planted; the more he cleared his mind of other subjects, the more it flourished.

Where had he seen Roberts before? Probably at the house of a former employer, perhaps in the pages of an illustrated newspaper, even possibly in the police-courts. In the courts! There he had seen thousands of

faces; in the dock, on the witness-stand, in the jury-box. Of all places that was the most likely!

He was passing a vacant seat; intent upon settling the question one way or the other he sank down upon it and closed his eyes. He recalled Roberts's clean-cut features and fresh complexion; the image of it was quite clear, so he searched in his memory cells for its double. He knew that in the background of his mind was a misty reflection, a nebulous double of the valet. When? As what? Where?"

The minutes ticked by, instead of growing clearer the picture of the past faded; he could not place the supposed likeness, nor visualize it as he wished. In the end his concentration vanished, thoughts of Roberts became intermingled, other memories of other people cropped up——

He rose to his feet. He was merely wasting time, so to give just one more chance of proving his impressions correct, he took a taxi to Scotland Yard.

He knew Detective-Sergeant Baker well, and Baker pulled the ropes for him. Less than fifteen minutes later he was in that special portion of the Yard where are kept photographs by the thousand of convicted criminals. Diligently he waded through till his eyes became blurred and his brain bemused by the ever-changing galaxy of faces. Two hours passed, then three hours, and he was no nearer to success than when he started.

Then, when he had almost given up all hope, he found that for which he looked. Roberts, without a doubt! Roberts now, but Jim Walker, "Shifty Jim" in those days.

The laughter of triumph bubbled up; he could not repress it. It was one more stepping-stone to victory, another move forward in the unmasking of Blackshirt.

"Birds of a feather——" he chuckled.

* * * * *

Johnny, the office boy, spotted Hepplewhaite immediately he entered the building.

"Gee! Mr. Hepplewhaite, there you are at last. I thought you was never coming. There's a cove in the waiting-room what's been waiting for you for the last two hours. Won't see no one but you, 'e says."

"What's he want, Johnny? I am too busy to see anyone; you know that."

"Yes, Mr. Hepplewhaite, but the chief said you had better see him!"

Hepplewhaite shrugged his shoulders. "Show him up, then."

Scarcely a minute later the reporter was sitting opposite the man who had waited so long for him. The caller was a young, undersized and pasty-faced object of about twenty-six years, with sleek oiled hair, and eyes which tried to be steadfast, but usually darted furtively away beneath a steady gaze. Hepplewhaite mistrusted him immediately.

"Are you the bloke what's been trying to catch Mr. Blackshirt?" the man whispered.

Hepplewhaite sat up, and his eyes glistened. "Yes," he replied, "and my name is Hepplewhaite. If you have any news for me——"

"Don't you worry, mister. I have, but before I spill it I wants to know where I stand. I don't mean money," he added quickly, as he saw the other open his mouth to speak, "though I won't say that a bit wouldn't come in jolly useful, and I shall expect some from the *Evening Star* in due course. No, what I mean is—supposing as how I tell you something which will mean Blackshirt being arrested? Will he ever discover who 'spilled the beans'?" He glanced in a frightened manner to each side of him.

Hepplewhaite laughed. "Don't you worry about that. I will give you my word that Blackshirt will never hear who be—who gave us the news of him."

The man sighed with relief. "Well, that's all right, then. Now listen! Some months back, almost a year, I should say, a man came to me to do a little business for him, Mr. I. N. Need he called himself. He told me as how he wanted to catch a chap who had been playing a dirty trick on his sister, and how, sooner or later, that man would come to me and ask for the address of Mr. I. N. Need.

"This gent., Mr. Need, had got things plotted out pretty nicely. One day a gentleman came and asked for Mr. Need, and I spins him a tale which I was told to tell: as how Mr. Need would call the next day or so on me, and when he did I would give a signal. He went away pretty satisfied that everything was O.K.

"Then comes Mr. Need. You should have seen him smile when I tells him what happened. Then what you think? He asks me the names of one or two men what wouldn't mind doing a bit of rough-house business. I gave him some names, and that was all I knew—just then, anyway.

"Some time later I heard more. This Mr. Need had laid a trap, and the other man who had walked into it was a man dressed all in black, and who this 'ere Mr. Need called—Blackshirt!"

"Good Lord!" Hepplewhaite leaned forward in his excitement. "Go on, man, go on!"

"I am going on, guv'nor, don't you worry! 'S matter of fact, I didn't think much more of it until a few nights ago. Then what do you think? I saw this Blackshirt man walking across Wandsworth Common. Yes, Mr. Hepplewhaite, as true as I'm sitting here I saw him with my own eyes; and what's more, I know where he is living.

"Thomson's his name, and he is stopping at 1, Cheyne Road, Wandsworth Common, and, by gum! if there's anyone I 'ud like to see in chokey it's 'im, the blighter!"

Then Hepplewhaite sat back in his chair and laughed with delight. Victory was in sight at last!

"So you shall, so you shall," he chuckled. "Now I shall get him just where I want him."

When his caller had gone, Hepplewhaite sat back in his chair and dreamed. Victory was in sight, yes, but now several points occurred which had escaped him in his first flush of enthusiasm. Thomson might be Blackshirt, but, apart from what he had just heard, what other proof had he of this fact? None! With that thought, too, he remembered what one of the Scotland Yard detectives had once told him.

Hepplewhaite had challenged him on the number of unsolved mysteries of the past few months.

"Not unsolved, Hepplewhaite," the detective had answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that there is scarcely such a thing as an unsolved mystery in England," had been the answer. "It is only lack of proof which is always the trouble. Scotland Yard may know the solution, but that is a very different thing to collecting sufficient evidence to secure a verdict against the guilty one."

Such was the case now. Hepplewhaite might know that Thomson was Blackshirt, but how could he prove the fact? What kind of a fool would he look supposing he were to go to Sir John Ballintyre and accuse this Thomson of being Blackshirt without producing some corroboration of his late caller's statement? Especially since the man looked, to say the least of it, a none too reliable witness himself.

Proof! He must have solid proof! But how? How? Blackshirt was too clever to leave clues scattered broadcast behind him. There was only one way to secure what he wanted. Trap Blackshirt in the act, unmask him in his Blackshirt clothes, the tools of his craft in his hands!

He smiled bitterly. What else had he been trying to do ever since the first letter from that criminal had been pushed into his hand? Still, now his work would be three, four, six times as easy. Sooner or later Blackshirt would venture out again, and when he did, Hepplewhaite would be watching——

Suddenly he remembered Verrell, and he laughed ruefully. What a mistake he had made! .Supposing he had—but he dared not think of that.

So he cast Verrell and Roberts from his mind and remembered only Thomson. It would not be his fault if the end of the month did not see the finish of Thomson—*alias* Blackshirt.

* * * * *

The sun was shining high in the heavens before Bobbie awoke that morning. Not until a few minutes before five o'clock had she fallen asleep. Even then her thoughts were restless; she had been haunted by ghastly dreams in which she was for ever pursuing her husband. Several times she had caught him in his flight, clasped him in her arms, but just as she was about to kiss him on the lips he vanished into nothingness, leaving her weeping. She had twice awakened, only to find the pillow moist from her tears.

The morning papers, together with a cup of tea, were on the table beside her bed. Evidently Mary must have come and gone without Bobbie being aware of the fact.

She tasted the tea, but it was cold. Then she looked at the clock, and with a gasp of surprise, saw that it was already past ten.

Awake once again, her thoughts reverted to Blackshirt. As soon as she realized the fact she chided herself, and stretching out her arm she opened a newspæper to distract her thoughts. It was a vain effort!

In big letters, splashed across the top of the page, was announced:

BLACKSHIRT AGAIN

CRACKSMAN'S MOST DARING EXPLOIT

When she went to read further the letters blurred before her eyes, so that she had to clear them of the gathering tears before she could continue.

The story was told dramatically. With a graphic pen the reporter had drawn his picture well. As though she herself had been there Bobbie visualized the scene in the music-hall, the twirling, bouncing clowns, a figure in black suddenly falling from nowhere, somersaulting again and again till the spring subsided, the hush of the audience which preceded the roar of applause and laughter. Then the comedy of the clowns, the sudden, dramatic *dénouement*, Blackshirt's frantic leap for the dangling rope-end from above the stage—the paper made the most of it, the sensation was too good to be minimized in days when sensations were rare.

Underneath the report was a comment. Was it not possible, read the suggestion, that the latest exploit of Blackshirt should suggest a new clue to lackadaisical members of Scotland Yard? The leap for safety, the clamber up and down the drain-pipe, could only have been performed by either a trained athlete or an acrobat. Was it so much beyond the bounds of possibility that the pseudonym "Blackshirt" concealed the identity of a music-hall favourite?

Mary had brought up three papers, each one of which spared at least a column to relate in full Blackshirt's latest adventure. Bobbie read every word, a thrill of pride sharing with a tinge of fear premier place in her emotions. With regard to the former feeling, she knew it was wrong of her; it was as though, secretly,

she were morally encouraging her husband when she felt she ought to have been ashamed of his misdeeds, to have chided herself for even reading of them.

For all that there was laughter in her eyes, gladness in her heart. Whatever else he might be, Richard was a man through and through; every action he performed, his every sentiment, was that of a brave and fearless soul, and if he lived a dishonest life, he led it so straightly, so honestly that one could almost forgive him, almost excuse him, with the theory that really this life was none of his seeking, that he had been reared to it, forced into it, willy-nilly.

At the same time Bobbie knew such a state of affairs could not possibly last much longer. So far the gods had been kind to him; though he had been in several difficult situations, he had, with the help of his own ingenuity, been allowed to escape, but the favour of Fortune is as fickle as a woman's caprice. At any moment the time might come when all the cleverness, all the luck in the world would not avail him, and that would be the end of Blackshirt, the finish of his life.

Prompted by the feeling of sadness which invaded her heart, tears crept into her eyes. Already Fate had played one hand against him: all the good that his love for her had created within him had been scattered with one blow from a falling piece of timber. If it had not been for the accident in France, how different would the present circumstances have been. Blackshirt would be but a memory to police and public alike, while she and Richard would have been together in his little flat, a love-nest big enough for two—or even three—and her eyes gleamed with a wonderful soft glow which crept into them.

She pulled herself up. No time for dreaming; if she were to save Blackshirt from himself, from his legal enemies who were rightly seeking to punish him, she

must work quickly, surely. She already knew from Marshall that every day police activities were increasing; that they were casting their net in wider and still wider circles; that not only was the underworld being relentlessly combed and every known "fence" being kept rigorously under surveillance, but that at the bidding of their taskmasters every "nark" was worming his way into the confidence of all and sundry in an endeavour to pick up even the faintest clue of the elusive criminal.

Not only that; even the more obscure fringes of society were being tactfully approached, and from what Marshall learned from his old friends at the Yard, it was becoming increasingly evident to the police that Blackshirt might belong to circles so far unsuspected.

Bobbie did not doubt that probably, acting on the suggestion made in the daily papers, already the ranks of professional acrobats were bearing inspection, and if that search also failed to fructify they would next turn their attention to the athletes. Was it so impossible that afterward it might occur to some smart detective to investigate the small coterie of criminologists? In that case what might happen when it was discovered that her husband was not indeed in Switzerland? Might they not ask—"Where is he?"

The picture conjured up by her progressive thoughts frightened her. "The law of average is inexorable"—almost her husband's last words before the fatal crash! What did that mean exactly? Though for so many years Blackshirt had eluded the clutching hands of the police, the time would arrive—— She buried her face in her hands, while the tears flowed steadily, and wrapped in her grief she did not hear Mary bring in her breakfast and depart softly.

Again her thoughts turned to what had happened the previous evening. She had been so sure, so confident, that Blackshirt would obey her summons just as he had

in the past. There, in that dark office, she had intended they should have knelt down together before the safe so that the fragrance of her would have been wafted to him, her nearness have warmed him, her lips have tempted him, just as before, one night so long ago, when they had stood together in the shadows of Count de Rogeri's house.

Instead, what had happened? He had ignored her commands, in his own dare-devil way had flouted her, laughingly jeered at her, by breaking into the music-hall next door. So near had he been, and yet so far. As plainly as if his lips had muttered the words she believed she could read his insolent message to her.

She had failed for the second time! Her heart warned her in its own pounding language, her brain told her so in its own searing, taunting way. "You have failed! You have failed!" A jeering imp screamed the words in her ear, and her head drooped lower.

The coffee cooled in its pretty silver percolator; still Bobbie did not move. Obsessed by her thoughts her spirit turned despondent—she wanted him so. Novelist or criminal, sinner or saint, he was hers, she loved him with a clamouring, hungry love, and yet Fate, Destiny, or whatever guides our faltering footsteps in the foggy wilderness of life, had played them both a ghastly, knavish trick.

Then the clamour of the strident telephone bell echoed boomingly round the room and pierced her ears with its disturbing noise. For a moment or so she clenched her fingers and remained passive, determined to ignore the summons, but the ringing continued monotonously, and for the sheer relief from the sound she lifted the receiver.

"Hullo!" she called out wearily.

"Hullo! Park 00343?"

Before she could reply Bobbie had to still the wild

beating of her heart, for a sudden happiness flooded her body, choked her throat. The voice was that of Blackshirt, her husband, her loved one. She gazed incredulously at the instrument, afraid that she had made a mistake, that the clear-cut tones had not been his, that she had been dreaming——

"Yes, yes," she whispered.

"This is—er—Thomson speaking."

It was he; it was he! "Oh, God, thank You, thank You!" she whispered to herself, and then could scarcely refrain from speaking soft words of love into the mouthpiece.

"Well, now, you don't say so?" She wracked her brain for what she hoped he would believe to be typical Americanese, but it was a long time since she had spent those years in New York, and she had almost forgotten its slang, its colloquialisms. All she could remember, and imitate perfectly, was the musical intonation of the voice, that peculiar intonation which is, in many women of the United States, so charming and soft, especially to the Englishman, used to the monotonous uniformity of tone of his own countrywomen.

"Well, now, I do," he said, mimicking her so flawlessly that her eyes smiled. "I am telephoning you for an explanation."

"Explain! It is you who will need to do that, Mr. Thomson." Her voice was stern and hard. "And unless that explanation is satisfactory I shall carry out my threat. It is merely fortunate for you that I have not done so already."

"Give a dog a bad name——" he said bitterly. "But may I ask why it is I who must give an account of myself, and not you?"

"You may not," she replied coldly. "I am not responsible to you."

At the other end of the wire Blackshirt frowned.

Already he hated the woman who had contrived to secure his capture and had so nearly succeeded; at her callousness he felt the flame of his dislike for her flare up with renewed vigour.

"I thought not; and so it please Your Highness the bad dog will tell his tale." His voice was hard and deeply bitter. "Last night I went to Chiswick——"

"So I read in the papers this morning."

He took no heed of her interruption. "And there I searched for and found the window of which you told me, and at the risk of breaking my neck I climbed up to it and entered." He paused.

"Why do you lie to me?" Suddenly Bobbie felt angry. Why was he spinning this preposterous tale to her? It was not like him to lie, and it hurt her.

Blackshirt stared at the telephone. Slowly the blood drained away from his face, leaving an ivory pallor. The lie direct! That hurt—hurt like hell! For that—she might blackmail him till his soul was no longer his own, but in the end he would have his revenge. If she firstly sucked the life out of him with the demands which he believed would inexorably follow in due course, only to drag him to the dust when she had finished, then should she fall with him. He would see to that! He battled with his emotion and continued, again unheeding her interruption.

"That room I entered," he reiterated, "and found in pitch darkness. While I waited for you I groped around. Suddenly the door was thrown open. It knocked me down. A man sprang for me, and we struggled. I broke away and ran—ran into a brilliant patch of light, a place of ropes and obstructions. No wonder, then, that I tripped and fell—on to the stage of the Palliadrome."

With a pang of dismay she realized of what she had accused him. The words had escaped from her almost unconsciously in her disappointment, and now she

knew he had told her nothing but the truth. What had happened she knew not, but his words rang too sincerely to be doubted.

She would have given anything to have recalled her accusation, but it was too late, far too late, for the damage was done.

She became conscious that he was continuing. "So you see, Your Highness, I obeyed you, and what was the result? But for the grace of God I should have been arrested. You—you would have betrayed me—you, with your pretence of having me assist you."

"Oh! Oh!" The cry was wrung from her lips. "No, I swear no. I do not understand. I was there waiting for you."

"Waiting for me?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes, yes," she said eagerly. "You must believe. Heaven forbid that I should play traitor——" Too late she realized she had betrayed herself, but her wits worked quickly. Before he could catch her up on what she had said, she followed on: "So long as I can make use of you."

Somehow her denial conjured up a picture of the High Street at Chiswick as he had photographed it in his memory, and then he knew, all at once, what had happened. The Palliadrome—the offices—side by side, probably built by the same architect—the pitch darkness! He had climbed in the wrong window!

Until that moment this simple explanation had occurred to neither of them, Bobbie believing he had failed her, he certain she had betrayed him.

For some unaccountable reason he took the trouble of explaining to her, even though she had called him a liar, both pride and obstinacy prompting him to remain silent. But though he did so, the hurt rankled, fed by the thought that she was his task-mistress, that he was helpless in her hands.

So, while Bobbie planned and schemed to secure his

love, remembering how she had won it once before, could she but have known, the effect was just the opposite, for, instead of love, it was aversion which he felt for her.

* * * * *

After an exhaustive time on the telephone, Verrell returned to 1, Cheyne Road, the furrowed lines of his forehead indicating dark, puzzled thoughts behind, of which the worst was that henceforward he was to telephone Park 00343 every morning! When the Girl on the Phone had calmly and audaciously given that order to him he had received her words as a joke, but when the deadly earnestness of her voice assured him too well that she had spoken in all seriousness he battled with her till his voice was hoarse and his temper frayed. Time and again he refused decisively to comply with such a ridiculous command, but as often as he did so she evenly reminded him that he was in her power, that unless he carried out her wishes she would acquaint Scotland Yard with the fact that Thomson and Verrell and Blackshirt were one and the same person. Then afterward, when he inquired the reason why, he was told once again that it was not for him to ask her questions, only to answer them. It was in vain for him to plead with her to recall or even modify the suggestion; her will was indomitable. Remorselessly she repeated her demands, pointing out that he must be willing to have done unto him all he might possibly do to others, that, as a criminal, he infringed the laws of the land, and was thus liable to punishment. Was it for him to pick and choose the hand that balanced the delicate scales of justice?

That was why the smile which Nellie Jones lavished upon him, as she opened the door, went straight to his heart. The girl might not possess quite the prettiness of his ideal woman, she might not own her rightful

share of intellect and intelligence, but at least she was human and undoubtedly sympathetic, and was not a slave-driver, a blackmailer! Also she had personality, reality, he admitted to himself, and was not just a voice on the phone, an invisible being who spoke from the ether.

"I saw you from the window," Nellie explained; then, observing his worried look: "Why, poor Mr. Thomson, you do not look very well. You have a headache?"

"Why, no, Miss Jones," he answered, his face breaking into a smile which chased away the shadows. "One of my characters would not do just as I wished her to, so I was trying to solve the difficulty by meeting her halfway."

"Are your characters so real to you, then?" she asked wonderingly.

"They are more than real. More often than not they force me to write them as they will rather than as I prefer. I have written many a story in which, willy-nilly, my people have shaped their own destiny, quite contrary to the one I originally intended; that is to say, the villain of the piece has finished by becoming the hero, instead of being killed, or going to prison, or whatever fate I may have planned for him in the first rough plot."

"I am afraid I do not understand." And, indeed, she didn't, for it was far beyond her comprehension. "But you did not tell me you had written so many stories as all that."

Beneath his breath he cursed himself for the slip he had made, and made haste to dispel the doubts which, as her words showed, were forming in her mind. "I have written very many in my time, but nearly all I have torn up and thrown into the wastepaper basket," he lied.

"Why?" she asked naïvely.

He realized he must, to cover one lie, tell another, however insignificant and futile. "Because I have not considered them good enough to send to editors," he explained.

He suddenly realized they were still standing in the narrow hall, and took advantage of the fact to change the conversation. "Why, whatever are we stopping here for?" he asked with a laugh.

"I—I don't know." She giggled nervously. "Of course, you must go upstairs to work." The disappointment in her voice was palpable, and somehow he felt subtly flattered.

"Perhaps! Are you busy?"

She shook her head emphatically. "I have finished work this morning, except for some shopping."

"You are always shopping! May I come with you?"

She could scarcely speak for the mixture of excitement and triumph which bubbled in her throat and heart. "I would just love you to come," she whispered. "But your work——"

"Can wait. I do not feel in the mood for it."

So they started out, and it was not long before she twisted the conversation round to his work. She was frankly interested and curious, and Verrell found he had to step warily in replying to her numerous questions. What kind of story did he write? Why had none been printed? Evidently he had private means, otherwise upon what did he live? These, and many more queries, she put to him, until he found himself involved in a veritable maze of untruths. Finally he felt furious. He detested lies and liars, and yet, because of his initial untruth, he realized that he was committed to a future of deception.

For the first time he began to hate his false rôle. Before, it had been a game, all part of his criminal career; now he began to see it in a different light.

Through being what he was—a criminal—he was forced into living a lie, to deceive everyone with whom he came in contact, and, worse still, to become the slave of an unknown woman.

What a fool's game it was after all! In his bank, even if it were in the name of Richard Verrell, was plenty of money, enough to keep him in affluence. Why, then, risk his liberty for the sake of the few hundreds which his hands netted him? He did not have need to answer his own question; it was so obvious. He was a criminal now only because he loved every moment of the time when he was "on the job," from the initial conception of a fresh escapade, the gradual building-up of his plans, the actual burglary itself with its thrills and excitement, till the return home, flushed with triumph and victory. A fool's game, but a great game!

Could he have but known, this new mood was, in reality, the earliest prickings of a reawakened conscience, deadened temporarily by that fateful crack on his head. For the first time since the collision his real self was asserting its voice, piercing the false obsession which had smothered his soul, surmounting the criminal instincts which clogged his consciousness.

During that too brief but illuminating period he became once again the man whom Bobbie had discovered and loved, whom she was even now endeavouring to rediscover.

The mood did not last, and Nellie was responsible for its flight. She stopped in front of a jeweller's shop and sighed affectedly.

"I love jewellery," she murmured, "and I haven't any at all—at least, real jewellery. Look, all these are paste." She indicated the cheap necklace and earrings which she wore, the latter the only signs of any individuality about her.

Verrell gazed through the thick plate-glass at the

array of sparkling jewels. There were rings by the dozen; tray after tray was set out, ranging from thirty shillings to seventy-five pounds. Necklaces intermingled with brooches and bracelets, ear-rings with pendants and studded combs. His expert eye quickly travelled from one side to the other, while his lips curved into a slight smile of contempt. There was not one piece in the window worth touching; it was obviously a cheap-jack shop, and if here and there the price mounted high it was more because of the false value of the stones rather than the taste or the quality of the setting.

Then all at once he saw he had made a mistake. There was one thing in the window worth having; he had missed it at first because it had lain well back, almost hidden by a rather ornate tray of gold pins manufactured into names, and the more he looked, the more exquisite it appeared to him. It was a dainty, heart-shaped pendant, its tiny stones set into filigree silver, the metal dull with age; obviously an antique; but how it had crept into a window so full of modern crudities he failed to conceive, though the suggestion occurred to him that the jeweller might have inherited it, and preferred what money it would fetch to its beauty—an idea not far from the truth.

The small, pure diamonds sparkled temptingly, the subtle opals gleamed at him with a defiant air, and the flickering fire of the rubies shone redly, wickedly. He could feel each separate stone creating within him the desire to handle it carefully, to clean it with loving care. He could picture the pendant resting against some white, satiny throat—— He wrenched his eyes away at last, to discover that Nellie was tugging at his arm.

"Whatever is the matter, Mr. Thomson? I have spoken to you three times, and you have not taken the slightest notice. You are not ill?"

Wearily he gave the inevitable explanation—a sudden idea for a good plot. It satisfied her, and they passed on. Not before the damage was done, however. The pendant had aroused all the criminal instincts in Blackshirt; he had seen a jewel which he wanted for its own sake, and, almost without realizing the fact, plans began to evolve in his mind to acquire it.

Just one way, the most simple method, of securing it never occurred to him, for such was the curious haze which clouded his conscience. To have bought it would have cost him less than ten pounds, yet never once did such a thought pass through his mind, for unfortunately it was with Blackshirt's eyes that he had gazed at the jewel, and quite half of the joy of possessing the pendant would be the appropriating of it in Blackshirt's own particular way.

* * * * *

It took Hepplewhaite two solid hours to assure the All-Highest that he was positively on the track of Blackshirt.

"Very well," Sir John boomed at last. "If, as you say, you are practically certain of the identity of this crook, tell me now so that I can judge whether you are barking up the right trail or not."

The reporter knew Sir John. Politely but firmly he refused to divulge his ideas, being well aware that directly he mentioned anything definite the All-Highest would insist upon a vague mention of it being made in the *Evening Star*, something to keep the readers on the *qui vive*.

"Please, Sir John, give me a free hand for the next week or two, and I guarantee that the *Evening Star* will reap in the biggest scoop in newspaper history. Remember, if any word should leave my lips before I have conclusive proof, I am liable to an action for libel."

The chief sided discreetly with the reporter, and, grumbling, Sir John agreed to Hepplewhaite's suggestion, but he did not forget the usual sting in the tail of his remark.

"And remember," he concluded, "that we cannot afford to pay salaries to any of our staff for unproductive work. I will give you a month only. At the end of that time either Blackshirt must be exposed or——"?

Hepplewhaite was painstaking from long training, so while Blackshirt prepared his plans to secure the pendant, Hepplewhaite laid his for the exposure of Blackshirt, and Hepplewhaite was the first to move.

From afar he watched every movement of his prey, and in three days came to realize that Verrell was in the habit of telephoning from a public call office every morning between ten and eleven o'clock. Also from afar he read Verrell's expression, and now and again his lips, and, with the help of clear reasoning power and a certain deducive sense, reached the conclusion that, while Blackshirt carried out the actual work of the burglaries, it was someone else who planned and prepared them.

One morning he scored a trump. Verrell had just finished telephoning when, as he left the box and turned a corner, Hepplewhaite nipped into the box.

He rang exchange. "I am very sorry, miss, but by mistake I have torn up the number of the call I have just had. Can you possibly remember it for me?"

"Wasn't it Park 00343?"

"Of course, that is the one. Thanks very much indeed."

Park 00343! That was all he wanted to know! His plans were complete!

* * * * *

One night Verrell had a letter:

> Too late to have you telephone me. To-night about 12.30 a.m. at 36, Windsor Road, Hendon. Park 00343.

"Good Lord!" He could not restrain the exclamation. The letter was short and obvious, and yet he read it through at least three times, and strangely enough saw a certain humour in it.

Without appearing to be so it was indisputably a command. There was no wavering hesitancy about it. Without being actually requested in words, yet was he ordered to enter a house in Hendon. No hint as to what he might find there. Nor did the Girl on the Phone even compromise herself by so much as an initial. Just "Park 00343"! An extraordinary letter which in less than twenty words contained enough matter for a five minutes' conversation!

There was no doubt in his mind that the Girl on the Phone had sent the letter, for its curtness, its confidence, was so much the characteristic of his mysterious telephonist. More by luck than judgment Hepplewhaite had struck the only possible note in a letter which otherwise would have been certain to have raised suspicions in the mind of the ever-alert Blackshirt, yet he had penned it trusting entirely to luck, and imagining that he was writing as though from one confederate to another.

In the passing days Blackshirt had learned that it was unwise to argue with the Girl on the Phone, and so, on receipt of the letter, he prepared to journey out to an unknown district on a hazardous expedition.

In less than an hour he was ready. He said goodnight to the Jones family, retired to his bedroom, and locked the door. Then he slipped out of his ordinary lounge suit and attired himself in the clothes of Black-

shirt. All ready, he softly raised the window. There was no one to be seen, so he leaped from the sill on to the soft earth, landing easily, with no sound other than the slightest thud, then via the tradesmen's entrance into the street.

He felt curiously elated as he walked toward Clapham Junction, from where he intended to take the train to Victoria. Of late his curiosity had been intrigued by the voice of the Girl on the Phone: its liquid music, its scarcely concealed timbre of happiness and vivacity contrasted oddly with her attitude toward him, so that he had begun to wonder which represented, in truth, the Girl on the Phone. Was she really a beautiful girl who was merely playing a game with him, or, on the other hand, was she really a hard, blackmailing type of woman who, a born actress, was able to inculcate into her voice a characteristic which was not, indeed, a natural one, but was just another false note in a false, heartless personality?

He arrived at Hendon long before the time mentioned in the letter, but this was according to plan. While the streets were still lit up, not only from street-lamps, but also from the lighted bedrooms, he surveyed the geography of the street, and took a mental note of the adjacent houses.

Number 36 itself, he noticed, was in darkness, and as far as could be seen there was not a suspicion of light, even from the back. From this the obvious conclusion was that, either all the members of the household were out for the evening, or else the house was unoccupied for the time being, and he felt a leaning toward the latter theory, for if the Girl on the Phone were to be there too, it was fairly evident that she would choose an empty house in which to meet him.

One thing pleased him in his survey. Number 36 was as far from a street-light as any other house in the road, and being a fairly dark night, he foresaw no difficulty

in entering through one of the ground-floor windows, more so that he would be hidden by a tall box hedge.

There being no further reason to hang around, Verrell decided to go for a walk until the time appointed, and set off, automatically registering the roads in his head so that he should be able to find his way back.

In due course he returned, fresh and invigorated from his walk, but this time his footsteps fell softly so that no echoing clamour of them betrayed his presence to chance insomnia sufferers.

There was no one about, only a noisy taxi which soon swished past. The time was ripe for his disappearance, and as a shadow he vanished through the gate of 36, and so behind the hedge.

It was the work of a minute to force the catch; just as a clock struck once, the quarter-past midnight, he entered the dark room and lowered the window behind him, and adjusted his black mask.

For the moment he still wore his hat and overcoat, and a new black scarf, which replaced the one lost at the Palliadrome, and, of course, the inevitable silk gloves, without which he never worked. Not divesting himself of any one of the garments, he found a chair and sat down to wait.

He was purposely early. If the Girl on the Phone were indeed going to appear he wanted to be the first to arrive. If by any chance she should already be there, he intended to remain still until she eventually betrayed her presence. Not before one o'clock did he intend to move, if his theory should prove to be false.

So he waited. Somewhere a clock slowly ticked away the minutes; presently it struck the half-hour, and nothing had happened. Blackshirt had long ago learned patience, and he sat perfectly still, quite content to continue his vigil.

It was perhaps ten minutes later when he heard a faint sound from somewhere at the back, and his heart

leaped. Perhaps the Girl on the Phone! He would meet her, surprise her!

So quietly did he move that Hepplewhaite, in the back, waiting, was almost caught napping, despite all his carefully laid plans. The reporter had made the mistake of under-estimating the skill and audacity of his opponent, and argued to himself that Blackshirt would choose the easiest line of approach—namely, through the back. Thus he waited in the small hall at the rear, from which position he could command all that part of the house.

Consequently he was the more surprised of the two when suddenly Blackshirt stumbled into him, so much so that had the circumstances been different Blackshirt would have been away and Hepplewhaite would have had the chagrin of knowing he had failed once again, but——

"So you are here?" Blackshirt was so confident that he did not move, expecting to hear the Girl on the Phone give an answer to his useless question. It was that which gave Hepplewhaite time to recover.

Blackshirt got his answer—the electric-light flashed on with a dramatic suddenness, and Blackshirt found himself opposite a stern-faced man, revolver in hand.

"Yes, I am here," snarled Hepplewhaite, who felt no flush of victory, but only a consuming anxiety to unmask and deliver the man before him into the hands of justice. "Up with your hands."

There was nothing else for him to do but to comply. With a sinking heart he realized that he had fallen into a trap, that his days of freedom were finished. What made it all the more bitter was that, after all, the Girl on the Phone had betrayed him. She had acted well. Though he hated her he had, at least, trusted her—and this was the result.

"Good!" muttered the reporter. "Now, Mr. Blackshirt—*alias* Mr. Thomson—you will just go into that

room there and sit down. You must have thought yourself pretty cute, trying to cheek the *Evening Star* with impunity, and I suppose you laughed up your sleeve the night you dressed up as a policeman and walked me away. Still, he laughs best who laughs last! I thought you let me escape pretty easily, and I just made a few inquiries—yes, and dropped a hint at Scotland Yard about Marshall. Guess I cooked his dish. Now then, in you go."

Blackshirt obeyed placidly, in the first place because there was nothing else to do; secondly, because it would have been a tactical error on his part to have appeared aggressive, thus keeping his captor constantly on the alert.

It was an ordinary suburban back-parlour into which the reporter made him enter, which, as a means of exit, contained only a window and a door. Evidently Hepplewhaite had planned his campaign well, for in the farthest corner of the room was placed an ordinary cane chair. Toward this he ordered Blackshirt.

"Now you can sit down there," he said, and grinned unpleasantly. "For myself I shall sit here," and he pulled another chair up to the middle of the room. "You will notice that from this position I can command both window and door. I have a sensitive finger, I ought to mention, and the slightest movement on your part may set it in action with consequent unpleasant results to yourself. Now that we understand one another you may let your arms down."

Blackshirt did so. "Thank you," he murmured. "They were beginning to feel fatigued. You are indeed thoughtful."

Hepplewhaite was in no mood for pleasantries. "You can leave out that cackle. It cuts no ice with me. You are in my power now and nothing on earth is going to stop you seeing the inside of a prison within the next hour or so." He waved his free hand

toward the right. "You see that telephone? In less than five minutes I am going to telephone the police-station. I am only waiting until that time for one thing. I am going to have the pleasure of being the first man to witness the unmasking of Blackshirt. Take off that mask."

Blackshirt gazed desperately around the room, and his heart sank. So far as he could judge there was no possible hope of escape. Yet, aware how circumstances can be altered by taking advantage of even the most trivial loophole, he played for time, keeping a vigilant watchfulness for an opportunity of turning the tables.

"I think not," he said calmly.

Hepplewhaite sneered. "What do you mean—you 'think not'?"

"What I say. I shall not unmask."

The reporter gazed at him with amazement. "You are mad. Do you not realize you are my prisoner?"

"Unfortunately I do, but what difference does that make?"

"You will do what I say."

"And if not?"

Hepplewhaite smiled. "If this revolver should go off I should have no difficulty in making a jury believe it was in self-defence—particularly so in the case of the notorious Blackshirt."

"Really!" Blackshirt shrugged his shoulders; meanwhile narrowly watching the muzzle of the revolver, which, however, never wavered. "But what of the doctor's evidence?"

"Pshaw! I can arrange a struggle easily. For the last time, will you take off that mask?"

"For the last time—no!" and he mimicked the voice of the other.

Hepplewhaite felt his cheeks flushing with the fury which consumed him, but at the same time he knew he was helpless. For all his threats he could not shoot a

man in cold blood. He comprehended that on this score his captive had the better of him, but it was, after all, only a small matter. When the police arrived they would soon snatch off the concealing strip of black silk.

He shrugged his shoulders. "You win this round. The next I shall win." He pulled the telephone toward him and lifted the receiver.

"Police station, please, miss."

Blackshirt felt despair enveloping him, but there was nothing he could do. Hepplewhaite's eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon his own, so that they would be bound to foresee the slightest movement. Moreover, the hand which held the revolver was too steady, too sure, ever to hesitate. Also, he knew that though Hepplewhaite might hesitate deliberately to shoot him as he sat still, such scruples would disappear the instant he might move. He was trapped; like the pitcher, he had gone to the well once too often.

"Police station? Good! Can you send a couple of men round at once to 36, Windsor Road—yes, to arrest a burglar—yes, I have him safe—yes, sergeant, and listen to this. I am Hepplewhaite of the *Evening Star*, and the man I have here is none other than Blackshirt himself—I thought you would be surprised—how long—yes, I can last out five minutes, fifty if necessary—good-bye."

"Five more minutes of liberty, Blackshirt. My Heavens! what a scoop for the *Evening Star*." He laughed happily for the first time, as if he were relieved at knowing the police to be on the way. Then, suddenly, his voice softened and a strain of regret crept into his next words. "You know, Blackshirt, I am sorry. This would be no business of mine in the ordinary way: it is not my job in life to go about arresting people, especially as I hear you are rather a decent sort, but in this world it is everyone for him-

self and the devil take the hindermost. If you don't go to the wall I shall, and there is a wife at home—and soon——"

He stopped. It seemed rather mean to talk in that strain to a man who might not see the outside world again for three, five, or even seven years. With a flutter in his heart it occurred to him what he would be feeling if the positions were reversed—five years in prison—it seemed cruelly impossible. Yet Blackshirt took it calmly.

He looked into the eyes of his prisoner. "You take it like a man, Blackshirt. Why don't you plead with me, you make me feel mean——"

Then the light flashed off to the accompaniment of a click, and before he could move he felt the full force of a body upon his back.

* * * * *

The police found only a sobbing, incoherent reporter. Blackshirt was gone, away into the wilderness of streets which is London.

It was a pity for Hepplewhaite that the tobacconist's assistant had not called upon him before he had left to interview Roberts; the valet was an adept shadower, and if Verrell's flat had gone unswept and undusted for the last few days it had been in a good cause, for it was Roberts who played the ace of trumps and took the trick.

WITHIN a few hours Blackshirt's world had metaphorically turned upside down. Yesterday he had been certain of himself, this morning he was adrift in a fog of incertitude, and Blackshirt dreaded lack of confidence in himself, believing in Herbert Spencer's precept that, "when a man's knowledge is not in order, the more of it he has the greater will be his confusion."

Blackshirt felt no other lines could better express his own state of mind. He had lost track of himself, was now finding himself in a maze of complications through which he could trace neither entrance nor exit. His mind revolved with thoughts of Roberts and Hepplewhaite and McTavish until indeed "his knowledge was not in order," his confusion was great.

Hurrying homeward with Roberts after he had so narrowly escaped from Hepplewhaite's trap he heard a story which filled him with amazement, and now he was trying to pull his scattered thoughts into some sort of coherence, while mentally comparing himself of yesterday with himself of this morning.

Yesterday, for instance, he had been Thomson. Officially, as he had learned from the newspapers, Richard Verrell was believed to be in Switzerland, so he had been content to allow the world to continue in that deception, and as far as he was aware, only one person other than himself knew that far from being abroad he was actually in London, and she was the Girl on the Phone, the girl from U.S.A. who, on the strength of that knowledge, proceeded morally to blackmail him.

Therefore—save to the Girl on the Phone—Verrell was in Switzerland, and only Thomson remained. Why had he fled to Wandsworth Common? Because of the flashing memory which had warned him that McTavish believed Richard Verrell to be Blackshirt.

To-day where was he? Roberts, his valet, not only knew that he had never been to Switzerland, but was also aware that he was hiding in Wandsworth under another name. Moreover, Roberts had learned more than that. Roberts was also cognisant that he was Blackshirt, and instead of betraying him to the police, had actually kept a friendly eye upon him, and thus had been instrumental in rescuing him from Hepplewhaite.

Good Gad! How many circles were there intertwining and interlacing? How in the first place did Hepplewhaite connect up Verrell with Blackshirt, in the second place Thomson with Blackshirt, and yet, if his words were to be believed, fail to associate Verrell with Thomson? It looked as though Hepplewhaite had travelled two converging sides of the triangle, had arrived at the apex without realizing that its base automatically connected up the other two sides in question. Hepplewhaite ought to have studied Euclid!

Not yet had Verrell unravelled the skein of complications. He had fled to Wandsworth for only one reason, to draw a red herring across his trail, to escape the groping clutches of McTavish, yet now he learned from Roberts that McTavish was dead; had been for months. How was it, then, that he did not know of the fact?

At this thought Blackshirt laughed bitterly to himself. Apparently there were many things of which he had no knowledge. To think he was hiding in Wandsworth under an *alias* when there was no necessity for it whatsoever. He groaned. What was the matter with his memory; why were the events of the last twelve months blotted completely from his mind?

For instance, why did he not remember more clearly the fire at Meyers; and still more, how was it he did not recollect Roberts's confession? To think that Roberts was an ex-criminal!

"It is no good, Roberts. You say you told me all when I was ill in bed, and yet I can remember nothing. What was this fire and how was I injured in it?"

"You had gone there to return some jewels——"

Blackshirt interrupted him. "To return some jewels! To help myself, you mean!"

Roberts glanced strangely at him through the corner of his eyes. "No, sir, to return them," he repeated firmly.

"Why should I return them? I am not a philanthropist."

It was on the tip of the valet's tongue to mention the one whom Verrell in those days had called his "Lady of the Phone"; how she had swayed him to saner, straighter views of life, but some intuition warned him to keep clear of any mention of his Lady of the Phone, just as he had avoided any word of Mrs. Verrell. Already he could see that Blackshirt was puzzled, nervous of the amnesia which had so strangely turned back the hands of his life's clock, and he felt that further revelations might prove harmful.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know, sir. Anyway, there was a fire; one of the maids was cut off from any hope of escape. You climbed up and rescued her, with the result that you were a hero the next morning. You should have seen what the newspapers had to say!" Roberts smiled slightly.

"Fire! So that is what has been worrying me. Roberts, there is one thing that is impressed upon my memory and which is ever rising before my mind's eye, and that is fire. I can see a starry night and mounting flames, and dimly hear the shrieks of people in pain. Is it the fire at Meyer's house that I have

been seeing and hearing in my imagination all the time?"

Roberts believed that it was the wreck of the train which Verrell saw, but he was afraid to say so. "Perhaps, sir!"

"Now tell me of last night. How was it you rescued me, how did you know I was Thomson, that Hepplewhaite had laid a trap for me?"

"I suspected that man Hepplewhaite, sir. One morning he came to the flat and asked awkward questions. I felt nervous and began to follow him. The day after my interview with him I trailed him to Wandsworth, and there I recognized you. After that I hung on to him like grim death, and yesterday morning saw him send you a letter.

"When he went to Hendon so did I, and hiding behind the fence of another house saw you arrive and made a kind of a guess what would happen. The rest you know. It was a narrow shave, sir."

"It was." Blackshirt spoke feelingly. "I owe my liberty to you, Roberts, I shall not forget. Poor Hepplewhaite!" Verrell laughed softly. "A miss is as good as a mile! I wonder what the police said to him when they found him alone? What do you reckon he is doing now? Still at the police station, perhaps, answering awkward questions!" His face sobered. "Nevertheless, Roberts, God knows, I am not out of the soup yet!"

"I know it, sir. You are free for the moment, but what of later on? Hepplewhaite knows that Thomson and Blackshirt are one and the same. For all you know, sir, the police may be waiting for you when you get back to Wandsworth."

"Perhaps!" Blackshirt spoke carelessly. "In any event, I have left no incriminating evidence behind me. Personally I am inclined to believe that Hepplewhaite will hold his tongue; he wants all the glory of arrest-

ing me himself. Still I am not going to take any chances: Thomson must disappear."

"Yes, sir, and Mr. Richard Verrell must be seen in Switzerland. Remember, Hepplewhaite knows Thomson is Blackshirt now, and he only suspects Richard Verrell. Without further proof he would not dare to denounce you to Scotland Yard." The valet paused. Inwardly he was plucking up courage to ask Verrell to cease his life of crime, and to inculcate into him finer ideals, just as he had done before when the old Blackshirt was convalescing from his injuries after the Meyer fire. He hesitated now, for the new Blackshirt was somehow a different man; he was more reckless, more daring, and in being so, was, Roberts believed, less ready to accept suggestions, advice.

Finally he ventured. "Why not give it all up, Mr. Verrell? The game is not worth the candle. You can't always win. Sooner or later the police will nab you and slip the darbies on, just as they did me, and then—— Stop in Switzerland for a year. Let Blackshirt be forgotten."

Verrell laughed, and when Roberts heard the barely concealed, mocking irony of it his heart sank; he knew he had failed. "You are a good fellow, Roberts, and mean well, but why should I stop? I love the adventure too much to give it up, beside which I have confidence in myself not to fear the feeble efforts of the police."

"What of to-night, sir?" Roberts asked dryly.

Verrell flushed. "Treachery, Roberts, but it will not happen again." And his face hardened as he pursued a new train of thoughts. For the second time the Girl on the Phone had betrayed him. It would not happen again! "No, Roberts, my dear chap, I'm not going to give up my life's amusement, not even if Hepplewhaite is yapping round the corner. Beside, I owe the world a grudge."

"Why, sir?" Rapidly Roberts slipped in the question, for intuitively he guessed the reason, and hoped it might prove an opportunity to speak of other things and other people, to remind Verrell that there was one who loved him, one whom he had loved, waiting for him with a glad welcome and a tender heart.

The question left Verrell in a quandary. Deep in his mind he knew he hated the world, though the exact nature of that grudge he had not so far been able to ascertain. Therefore he side-stepped the question.

"We shall soon be in a region where we shall be able to find taxis, Roberts. You had better take one home, and I will take one to Clapham Junction. There I shall pack—that is, if the police are not already on the spot—and Nellie Jones will have seen the last of Mr. Thomson!"

"And then you will go to Switzerland, sir?" Roberts made a last despairing effort.

"Perhaps," he answered, but his voice was jesting.

They found one late home-going taxi, and, ignoring Roberts's protests, Verrell insisted that the valet should take it, so presently he saw the red taxi light disappearing in the distance; as it turned a corner and was lost to sight his face broke into a smile.

He was going to leave Wandsworth, but before he did so there was a tiny piece of antique jewellery which he wished to possess, and a taunting devil whispered into his ear and tempted him. Why not now, at once? It was not yet two-thirty in the morning, there was still all the time he needed before daylight, and under the law of average the very fact that he had been in danger once before that night was surely a good augury that he had nothing more to fear. In his natural optimism it did not occur to him that, rather than his escape from Hepplewhaite's trap representing an item to be placed

on the debit side of the law of average, it was an omen of portent of which he should have taken heed.

Light-heartedly, therefore, he turned his face toward the south, and with a sharp, rhythmic pace which quickly covered the ground, he continued his way in the direction of Clapham Junction.

His plans were all prepared; during the last few days he had spent the greater portion of the time in studying the lay of the land, with the result that he had discovered an apparently effectual method of entering the jeweller's shop.

To attempt any attack on the front was, of course, utterly out of the question, so, as usual, it had been necessary for him to concentrate on the rear. It did not take him long to discover that the wary jeweller intended there should be no chances of his having the stock raided; every window, save that of the bath-room, was heavily barred. It did not take Blackshirt two minutes to make up his mind that to attack any window other than the bath-room would be a sheer waste of time, beside courting the risk of discovery.

He had seen from the start, therefore, that if he were to enter the jeweller's shop it could be only via the bath-room window, which, at first glance, also appeared impossible; hence the jeweller's economy with regard to the iron bars.

What Blackshirt did see, however, was that in that block all the houses were built in a T shape, the horizontal portion of the T being the front of the building, and the vertical the back or residential portion. This being the accepted architecture of the road for well over a hundred yards, it therefore followed that any particular portion of one house must be the facsimile of the similar portion belonging to its immediate neighbour, that since the bath-room window was on one side of the house, and not at the back, it must neces-

sarily face the bath-room window of the house next door.

Blackshirt had not only studied the jeweller's shop, but also that of the Clapham Junction branch of the Highland Whisky Stores Company, Limited, next door, and his discoveries there had proved more than satisfactory. In fact, he could still chuckle at the thought of the morning when he had, with the aid of a false moustache and an official-looking hat, represented himself as a member of the Water Board. Just as it happened, the tap in the bath-room was running to waste when he asked to see it, and to the good woman it was inconceivable that any other than a real inspector could have chosen such an unfortunate moment for his visit. Blackshirt had lectured her very severely on the waste, mindful of the economy instilled into all Government and borough officials!

It was a long walk to the Junction, but Blackshirt loved exercise, and, since he was naturally a quick walker, there was still plenty of time left to him for carrying out the burglary before the first paling in the sky should signify that the silent streets would soon awaken to life.

Easy enough to get to the rear of the shops, it took him scarcely a minute to arrive at the ground-floor window of the whisky stores, through which it was his intention to enter. Its latching was criminally careless; Blackshirt was enabled to slip it just as easily as he subsequently raised the window; in fact, somewhat more easily, for the window was inclined to squeak, and had to be coaxed upward.

Inside the house it was quite dark, but, picking his way with ease, he moved onward from the kitchen into the downstairs hall, and from thence up the stairs toward the bath-room, his practised feet making no sound. Farther up he heard distinctly the sound of snoring from one of the bedrooms.

The bath-room itself was on a half-landing, for which he was grateful, for the first actual landing was six stairs higher. With an almost supernatural care he turned the handle and entered, then listened acutely for any sound which might lead him to believe he had been heard, but except for the sonorous snoring and the sound of a baby crying in the distance there was no other noise. He shut the door, then turned the key.

Blackshirt now began to move what little furniture there was in the room, such as the one chair, towel-rack, and a small table containing shaving implements, into the bath itself; there was very little space in the room, and Blackshirt needed all of it. This done, he opened the front of his black shirt, and from the small belt which he wore next to his skin, and which contained a number of perfectly turned, unlawful instruments of finest steel, he extracted a jemmy and a small chisel.

Next he kneeled down and, inserting the chisel into a crack between the floorboards, proceeded to gently prise one of them up. It was ticklish work; they had been down some time, the nails had rusted, and the wood had swelled, but Blackshirt exerted pressure, and one end of the board came up. The other end was still more difficult, but force told again—the nails gave way with a shrieking groan, and Blackshirt quivered with tension, wondering whether he had been heard.

He tiptoed to the door and applied his ear to the upper panel, but as the snoring continued and there was no other sound, he concluded that the noise had not penetrated beyond the limit of the four walls. Incidentally he came to the conclusion that the snore was comforting; it made a good alarm signal!

With the board freed from its resting-place, he was now all prepared for his attempt to enter the jeweller's; so he opened the window. Exactly opposite him was the other bath-room window, so he carefully slid the board across the intervening space, praying hard that

his eyes had not deceived him and that it would reach the opposite sill. It did, but with scarcely two inches to spare at either end. With a thrill Blackshirt knew that he would have to step warily if he wished to avoid crashing down below.

The crossing was hazardous on account, not only of the risk of falling, but also that of being noticed. He had to pass two bedroom windows, if by any chance his shadow should be seen, silhouetted against the moonlit sky, discovery would prove inevitable.

However, he reached the jeweller's window safely. This one he did not need to force, for it was open at the top, and with joyful abandon Blackshirt kissed his hand to it. The way was evidently open for him—a good omen!

He listened at the bath-room door before opening it, but the house was perfectly quiet. His fingers curled round the handle; with an even pressure he gradually turned it until he felt the door yielding to his pull, and presently was able to peer into the darkness of the house beyond.

There not even the faintest reflection of the moon penetrated, so he used his electric flash-lamp, and with its assistance made his way down the staircase. At the bottom were two doors side by side, so he assumed that the one on the right was the one which led into the shop.

In his belt were skeleton keys. It was almost certain that one of them would open the door, for a hasty glance revealed the fact that it was a latch of simple design, but even if the skeleton keys should fail he had another tool which would enable him to pick the lock in a very short space of time.

He selected the skeleton key which seemed most likely to fit and inserted it into the keyhole. Even as he did so the door moved slightly, and Blackshirt started in surprise. So certain had he been that the door would

be locked it had not occurred to him to try and open it in the ordinary way.

He stood still, suddenly uneasy, conscious that there was an atmosphere of mystery in the air, an undefinable sensation to which his sensitive nerves responded. It was as though he had received a premonition of portending disaster. Tensely keyed up, he remained motionless, his ears listening acutely for the slightest sound, his limbs alert to move at the faintest warning.

Far from hearing any noise, he became aware that there was an uncanny stillness as if Nature itself were hushed. Not even a board creaked, nor a draught stirred restlessly, though Blackshirt knew from past experience that at no time, least of all at night, is an inhabited house entirely free from noise. Sometimes the sound may be only a mouse scuttling along behind the skirting or beneath the floorboards; it may be only the wind sighing in the chimney, the rustling of leaves outside against the window-panes, the faint echo of far-off traffic, the quiver of passing trains; always some noise, but never the deathly silence which seemed to wrap itself around his heart.

It was ominous and rather ghastly; it presaged evil. The thrill, the excitement, the joy, all so characteristic of Blackshirt, dropped away from him so that he felt mentally unclad; his lips quivered sensitively and then tightened. Was he for the second time that night walking into a trap? Was there inside that unlocked room yet another man holding a loaded revolver in his hand ready to point at Blackshirt's stomach?

If so he would remain more still, more patient than the man within. Unless his instincts were playing him false and his imagination merely leading him astray, he would hear in what direction lay the danger, and would encounter it with the fleeting quickness which was his from many years of training.

He continued to stand immobile, waiting for the first

signs of another presence, but none came. The silence remained intense and foreboding. So passed minutes, until Blackshirt gradually relaxed. Despite the open door, the atmospheric influence, there seemed no other manifestation, so soon he came to think that it was himself who had been at fault, that his mind, upset in the first place by the easiness with which he had walked into Hepplewhaite's trap, and in the second place by Roberts's revelations, was becoming influenced so much that it became receptive to suspicion when none existed, to imagine danger when there was no cause for it.

At the same time he was not less on the *qui vive*, and silently as a ghost he stepped into the room. It was as intensely quiet, but though he held his own breath, his ears caught no sound of any other person breathing, so with a suddenness which he knew would be startling he switched on his lamp, and while its small, sharp beam stabbed through the darkness, held himself ready to drop to the floor at the first sound.

Nothing happened, and Blackshirt knew there was nothing to fear, so he snapped the light off again. Heedless, therefore, of the covered glass counter, he approached the window, where he knew resided the one piece of jewellery for which he had come. As for the rest of the stock, he would not touch it; its value was not worth the trouble of its carriage, for even if he sold it to a "fence," the sum total would be negligible.

He pushed back one of the sliding panels which formed the back of the window, and, carefully inserting his hand, felt for the tray, in the corner of which should be the pendant.

The tray was where it should be, but the pendant was not; nor, strangely enough, were any of the other cruder pieces which had surrounded it. He frowned. Just pure luck! Only that night the jeweller must have

changed his window display, so that, unless a hasty search elsewhere should reveal it, his burglary would prove to be in vain.

His wandering fingers touched another velvet-coated tray. That, too, was empty. All his late suspicions, his vague fear of wrong, blazed up again in his breast. It was unnatural for empty trays to be in the window. Hastily he extended his arms. Other trays came within his reach. All empty, devoid of jewellery.

He stepped back to the shop again and snatched off the dust-covers from the counters. He felt he must look underneath, so for a brief second he brought his light into play again. These, too, were bare, from one end to the other.

So, after all, his visit was useless. Something had happened to deprive him of that for which he had come, but what? and then a solution of the mystery of the silence, the empty window, the bare contents, occurred to him. Between morning and night the jeweller must have moved, cleared his stock from one shop to another.

He could have laughed, even if it were with vexation. Yet, what had he lost? A trinket worth less than a ten-pound note! He shrugged his shoulders. He had drawn a blank, which he must accept philosophically. Time now to hurry back to the Jones's residence, and pack his goods together and go elsewhere—perhaps Switzerland!

He turned and made his way from the shop. Then—as he pulled the door behind him—a trifle carelessly now, so that it made the slightest noise—a sound which set his blood leaping and pounding broke the silence; an almost indistinguishable sound which he could have sworn was not unlike a muffled sob.

It came from his right, some way down the passage alongside the stairs. Then he heard it again, and knew he had not been mistaken the first time. It was a cry,

a child's sob, and the agony, the fear in it, made his heart quiver with a dull pain.

Perhaps the child was frightened of him. Poor wee mite! Risk or no risk he could not leave it there in the dark, dismal corner: the horror of it might turn the child's brain.

He moved quickly forward, but at the fifth pace his foot struck something on the floor, something soft which yielded to his toe. Surely it was a child, and he had kicked it!

He kneeled down and felt. It was someone—a shudder shook his body from top to toe, a ghastly shivering shudder which chilled his heart with dread, and brought a sobbing gasp to his lips. He had touched a human face, wet and sticky, icy-cold.

He had stumbled on tragedy, stark, appalling tragedy, and somewhere near was a child who must have seen it. Once again, at the thought, he swallowed the queer, constricting lump which welled into his throat. Death—blood—and a terrified child! How ghastly, how terrible!

There was no consideration for self then, for one thought and one thought only possessed him. He must get the kiddie away from the place with its hideous, uncanny quietude, its nauseating tang of blood, its ghastly atmosphere of death. He brought his lamp into play. In front of him was the corpse of the jeweller, his head battered in with a wound which made Blackshirt feel sick, and his hand quiver.

The beam of the lamp flashed into a corner. There was the child—a little girl of about nine, clad in a nightdress, and shrinking against the wall. Into the light two large eyes stared hypnotically from a deathly white face from which every atom of blood had strained away—stared with an expression which might never leave them—terror, palpitating, abject fear, shuddering horror.

"Oh God!" He whispered the words aloud. "Oh God!"

The expression of her eyes did not even change at the sound of his voice: it was as though frozen, inflexible.

Meanwhile his thoughts moved rapidly. There were two things to be done. One was to get the child away, then afterward to remove himself at the quickest possible speed, for he felt ill and sick with the bestiality, the brutality of the crime.

What could he do with the girl? Where could he leave her? Almost at once the answer occurred to him: with the people next door. He had seen the woman the morning he had posed as an inspector and knew she would look after the child; her dimpling cheeks and honest eyes spoke for themselves.

Whether anyone else were upstairs, above the jeweller's shop, he did not know, nor dared find out, but he did not think so, for the silence was significant. Beside, he knew the jeweller was a widower: he had found that much out in his preliminary inquiries.

He stepped over the corpse, and picking the child up in his arms, felt the little body shudder, but beyond a heart-breaking whimper she made no sound.

Quickly he hurried up the stairs, gasping for fresher, purer air, feeling as though he were being pursued by mocking, vicious demons. The house was foul, a sink of evilness.

Somehow he clambered out of the window and unsteadily crossed the plank bridge, once nearly slipping, but he recovered his balance and hurried on.

Then he was in the other house, and with a swelling relief heard again what was to him at that moment the sweetest music he had ever heard—the sound of snoring. That snore represented a sleep of innocence, an untroubled conscience.

Leaving the board and the window, everything as it was, he hurried up the few stairs to the door of the bedroom. He placed the child on the ground by it, then knocked.

With startling suddenness the snoring ceased, and a voice, thick with sleep, called out. Blackshirt knocked again, heard the springs of the bed creak, and knew his self-imposed task was finished.

Like a shadow he slipped away; just as the manager of the whisky stores discovered the child, Blackshirt climbed out of the window downstairs and hurried away into the night.

It was still dark by the time he arrived at 1, Cheyne Road, but in the east the sky was greying ominously. If he were to escape before daylight he must work quickly, always assuming that the police warned by Hepplewhaite were not already on the lookout for him.

He scouted round in every direction, but evidently the coast was still clear. Not a soul was to be seen, so he darted to the corner house and lightly vaulted the low wall, after which he climbed easily to his bedroom, aided by the architecture of the house, which included at even intervals a number of projecting tiled bricks.

Once in the room he rapidly undressed, to re-clothe himself in an ordinary lounge suit. As for his black shirt and the belt of tools; these, together with his black silk gloves and mask, went into a hidden compartment of his bag which the police or anyone else would have found only by tearing the bag open with the necessary implements.

As for the rest of the clothes he wore as Blackshirt, the trousers, the black socks, the dancing shoes, the gibus hat, the black scarf, and the opera cloak, these were such as any man might naturally own, and therefore not incriminating.

In less than fifteen minutes his bags were very nearly

packed. He was racing against time, the sky was slowly growing lighter in the east, and he wanted to be gone from the house of the Jones's for good.

That night of shocks was not yet over for Blackshirt; even as that thought passed through his mind the door of his room opened, notwithstanding the fact that he had locked it before venturing out, and there entered Nellie Jones, clad in night attire.

He had been using his marvellous sense of touch in his packing, not wanting the curiosity of any chance constable, patrolling the streets, to be aroused by a light so early in the morning, therefore the guttering candle which she bore in her hand lit up the room with weird, ghostly shadows, at the same time casting a halo round her marcelled hair which made her look almost beautiful.

She closed the door gently, then looked down at him, kneeling upon the floor beside his valise.

"So you are back, Mr. Thomson!" She spoke softly so that her words should not travel, but so clearly that he plainly heard every word she spoke. "And may I ask what you are doing?"

He could only stare at her in surprise, her words conveying no significance to him. "What are you doing here, Miss Jones?" he asked in a hushed whisper. "You are in my bedroom. If your parents found you here——"

"What of it, Mr. Thomson?"

There was a new note in her voice, a firm decided tone which carried in it a subtle undercurrent of triumph.

"Why, what would they think? Miss Jones, I beg you to go. I do not understand the reason for this visit."

"Don't you?" she replied carelessly. "Then neither do I understand why you are packing, nor why you have been out all night!"

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that, Miss Jones?"

"This is the seventh time I have come here since eleven o'clock," she said, "and this is the first time you have occupied the room."

"That door was locked," he accused—saying anything to give him time to think. Veritably he travelled under an unlucky star that night! Danger had threatened him time and again, and as quickly as he escaped from one bad situation so did he fall into another.

"Yes, and I unlocked it. We have always had duplicate keys, you know. But you have not answered me yet, Mr. Thomson. Why are you packing?"

"To save time, for later on this morning I must leave you for a week, Miss Jones," he extemporized quickly. "Last night I received a letter—you remember you yourself gave it to me. It was a message from an editor commissioning me to go to the North of England to report upon some sort of a conference which takes place later on to-morrow night—that is to say, to-night. I had intended telling you at breakfast. But now you must go. Your reputation would be ruined if you were found here."

"And yours, too?" she asked mischievously. Blackshirt became impressed with the idea that her words were ambiguous, and felt uneasy.

"Of course," he answered impatiently. "Please, Miss Jones!"

Instead of complying she merely advanced further into the room, and without warning sat on his bed, placing her candle on the table beside it.

"I am not going," she stated firmly. "And neither are you, Mr. Thomson."

He looked at her startled. "I am afraid I cannot understand you to-night."

"I can quite believe that." Then suddenly her

voice softened. "Have you ever been in love, Mr. Thomson?"

He glanced desperately around, as slowly what he believed to be the reason for her attitude began to sink into his mind. Not by word or deed had he given her any real encouragement to imagine that his feelings for her were other than those of friendship, and for that matter, friendship provoked by the necessity of being polite to the daughter of his landlady, yet seemingly she had misconstrued his attitude.

Now, it seemed, impatient that he had not expressed his feelings sooner, she was going to force his hand, willy-nilly. Unless he moved carefully he believed he would find himself in a situation from which it would be difficult to escape.

"No," he answered brusquely, while he evolved plan after plan as to how he could get rid of her. Moreover, she could not have intruded herself at a more awkward moment. Get away he must, and soon.

"Not even the teeniest-weeniest bit?" she insisted playfully.

"No, and I am never likely to be," he replied cruelly.

He saw her wince, but she did not move. Instead she looked pensively out of the window. "Do you know what would happen if papa came into this room now?" she asked presently. "He would insist upon us getting married." Then laughing quietly, "You don't know papa when he gets on the subject of modern-day morals. Of course, he is silly and all that, but——"

So she had sprung the trap at last. She hoped to ensnare him into marriage. Good Lord—marry Nellie Jones! He would sooner marry the Girl on the Phone —especially if she were anything like her voice.

All the same, he realized the desperate necessity of freeing himself before the jaws of the trap closed too firmly, and could see only one way of doing it.

"Miss Jones," he said firmly, "you are not yourself. You must have been reading some highfalutin novels lately. If your father came in now I should tell him the truth; that you came into this room uninvited, that you persisted in stopping here after I had several times asked you to leave, and, above all, that do what he might, I would never, under any circumstances, marry a woman whom I do not love."

The words were harsh, as he intended they should be, and watching her face carefully, he expected to see the blood recede from it, or her eyes fill with tears, anything, in fact, other than what actually happened. His words had no effect on her whatsoever, for she laughed softly, and, slipping off the bed, she ran to where he stood, clasped her arms around his neck, and gazed up into his face.

"You are cross with me, Mr. Thomson," she said, ogling him with her eyes; "you mustn't be, you know, because I love you, and I know before long you'll love me too."

His forehead grew damp as he tried to loosen her arms, but she had locked her hands together, interlacing her fingers, and short of using physical force he could see no way of releasing himself.

"Can't you understand what I say?" he cried desperately, "I don't love you or anyone else, and you can't trap me into marriage."

"Naughty boy," she scolded softly, "who is trying to trap you into marriage?"

"You are!"

Then suddenly in the candlelight he saw her face harden and her eyes glitter; exultingly he believed that he had at last forced her into a temper.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, perhaps you are right, but what matter? It makes no difference, for you are going to do one of two things, and I fancy I know which you'll choose. Either you marry me, or else—go to prison, Blackshirt!"

This was the finale of a night of tragedy; five hours of adventure and mystery, of a whirlwind of complication upon complication. He felt that he could no longer stand up against the buffetings of Fate. Did everyone in the whole wide world know of his double identity? Firstly, there was the Girl on the Phone. She knew him as Verrell, *alias* Thomson, *alias* Blackshirt. Treacherously pretending to be, if not his friend, at least a friendly confidante, yet twice she had betrayed him so that he had escaped only by pure luck.

Secondly, Hepplewhaite knew him as Thomson, *alias* Blackshirt. Thirdly came Roberts. Roberts knew as much of him as the Girl on the Phone, but whereas she was his enemy, his valet had proved himself more than a friend.

Now, as if three people were not enough to share his secret, there was a fourth, a love-sick girl whose every action smacked of artificiality, whose soul was steeped in the romance she had gathered from screen and novel. How in the name of goodness had she learned of him as Blackshirt, a connection which, but a few weeks ago, he would have sworn was unknown to police and public alike, always excepting McTavish? Yet McTavish was dead, and all this time he had been fleeing from the shadow only to reveal himself to the substance.

The Girl on the Phone, Hepplewhaite, Roberts, Nellie Jones! Dully his mind repeated the names in turn. Why not a few others as well, why not the world? What was the use of struggling against such odds?

He looked down into the face of Nellie Jones. Like

the Fair Rosamund, he was given the alternative of two evils—or was it the choice of Thetis to her son Achilles?—a short and glorious life, or a long but inglorious existence? That, indeed, was a more reasonable simile, for now he must choose between prison and married life. A long and inglorious existence! It would be well that, tied for life to a foolish, uncultured, and uncouth woman.

He felt her hands pressing his head down toward hers, and suddenly, before he could realize it, their lips were mingling, his cold and lifeless, but hers passionately caressing with a fervour which shook him. Despite himself, he felt the warmth of her body against his, the heat of her lips filling his mind and body with a quivering sensation.

Then he thrust her away. The situation was grotesque. He had not even admitted her impeachment. What proof had she that he was Blackshirt?

"What does this scene mean, Miss Jones? You must be mad. Marriage! Prison! What do you think your words convey to me?" Freed from him, he noticed that she sank on to the bed again, while her breast rose and fell with her intense emotion, and her eyes glittered triumphantly.

At his words she smiled. "Of course, you would say that, Blackshirt dear! I expected it, but it is no use you denying the fact. I have had proof from one who recognized you. Do you remember one night not long ago, when we crossed the Common, we were met by John Williams? Poor John, he has been in love with me for ages, but, you see, he is only an ordinary tobacconist's assistant. When he saw me with you it made him so jealous he couldn't sleep; he told me all about it a few hours ago.

"Whilst he was lying awake he was worried by an idea that he had somehow recognized you, and very early in the morning he suddenly remembered. You

were the man who gave him a five-pound note for something you wanted to know about a Mr. I. N. Need. You were the man whom Mr. Need kidnapped one night, and Mr. Need called you—Blackshirt. So you see, Mr. Thomson, it is no use you pretending you aren't Blackshirt. Besides, why have you been out all night if it wasn't to—as you say—'crack a crib'?"

There were many ways in which he might have refuted such slender evidence, but for once he felt mentally too weak to fence. Even four was not the total number of people who knew of him as Blackshirt; there was yet one more, a pimply, undersized tobacconist's assistant whom, so far as he knew, he had only seen once before—during the few seconds they had met on the Common under the lamp. As for the rest of the story, Blackshirt remembered nothing; but then, had he not discovered during the last few hours that there were many events of which he could remember nothing? God! if only it were not for that blank in his mind—if he could just remember! How could he successfully fight enemies who struck at him from out of a dark past? How could he counter their activities while his memory was just a blur of faint, misty pictures which came and went so quickly that he could not hold them long enough in his mind to visualize them in their proper aspect?

He must play a part. If he could get rid of her there might still be time to escape. Meanwhile the sky was becoming ever lighter; dawn was not far away.

He laughed scornfully. "Obviously you yourself do not believe that fairy tale."

"Why not, Blackshirt dear?" she simpered.

He had to clench his hands to restrain his temper. "If I were indeed the criminal you have named, you would hand me straight over to the police. Surely you would not wish to marry a common burglar?"

He was watching her face, and did not miss the look of determination which hardened her gaze, the tightening of her lips.

"Why not?" she asked suddenly. "Why not? Listen. Do you know my age? Nearly thirty—almost an old maid! Why shouldn't I be married? All my school friends, all the girls I know have managed to get husbands. Only I am left on the shelf, I who have prayed to be married ever since I can remember.

"Do you know how many weddings I have been to in the last ten years? Nearly fifteen, and yet except for a poor common tobacconist's assistant I have never had a fellow at all. Why? I am not ugly or crippled; my temper isn't nearly as bad as Mollie Wickham's. If you knew what she was like you'd wonder how any man could have ever plucked up enough courage to marry her. As for Peggy Watson, she is a cat, and besides that, she's got scrimpy hair, a cast in her eye, and teeth that stick out in front. She did quite well for herself—got a house of her own and two kids.

"Why aren't I married, why can't I have a house of my own, or, anyway, a flat? Instead, mother's always howling at me to get spliced so that she and father can retire. One would think it was my fault." She paused for breath, but only for a second; then she continued rapidly.

"Well, I suppose it is my own fault in a way, only I won't marry a common tradesman. I want to be a lady, a bit better than all my friends, and you just about suit me. Even though you are a burglar, Blackshirt, you look like a real gentleman, and you are an author. I have read some of your tales when you've been out.

"You and me are going to get married before anyone can say 'Jack Robinson,' and then can't I just

imagine the faces of Peggy and Mollie turn green when I tell them I've married an independent gentleman, and an author at that." Again she paused, while Blackshirt marvelled at the intensity of her emotion.

He took advantage of her pause. "Yes, but what would your friends say if your husband should get arrested for burglary? Would they look green then?" he asked dryly.

She laughed slyly. "Don't you worry about that, Blackshirt dear. I shall take good care my *husband* doesn't get up to any of his old tricks again. When you marry me, Blackshirt 'll have to fade away, like the old soldiers."

He felt helpless. The toils of circumstance were encircling him more and more, and the world became darker to him as the sky became lighter, flooded by the reflection of the quickly rising sun. He would make one more effort.

"But I don't love you. Surely you wouldn't marry a man who didn't want you. Our life would be, as Steele describes it, 'the marriage state, with and without the affection suitable to it, is the completest image of heaven and hell we are capable of receiving in this life.'"

Despite the bitterness of his voice, his acid words had no effect upon her. She smiled up at him like a little child. "I don't mind what all your stuffy old books say. I love you, Blackshirt dear, and am going to marry you. I know you will love me later on, when we are all alone together in some sweet little country house."

At last he realized the hopelessness of arguing with her. Her mentality was that of a girl many years her junior. There seemed, apparently, only one way of dealing with her.

"Miss Jones, will you please understand—even

were I Blackshirt, I would sooner go to prison than marry you."

At last she understood. Cruelly the truth drove itself home, and her eyes gradually filled with a glitter of hatred. She arose from the bed and stood before him.

"So that's how you feel about it, is it, Mr. Thomson? Rather go to prison than marry me. My God, then! and so you shall," she threatened coarsely, her newly aroused anger conquering even her usual affectation. "I'll just tell the police what I *do* know. You spin your tale of innocence to them and see if they believe you. Finish packing, Mr. Thomson. I'll just wait at the corner until I see the bobby coming along—and you needn't try and get out of your window; I shall be watching that, too." Her voice rose shrilly. "Prefer prison to marrying me, you gaol-bird! You poor shrimp!" She looked at him scornfully, then quickly flounced out.

So this was the finish. He had escaped one trap that night, but what had it availed him? Perhaps a matter of minutes now, and he would be marching to the police station, handcuffed to the constable. . . . He gazed away, his eyes unseeing. He had run his race and could not grumble. He had defied the law, mocked at its upholders, but now they were on the verge of retaliation, and he could not find it in his heart to deny the justice of it, the working of the inexorable law of average.

So he waited for the summons.

* * * * *

He did not keep count of time. What was the good? The sky grew brighter, signs of life began to be heard in the street—the milkman on the round, then the newspaper boy; but that there was still no heavy footstep on the stairs merely meant to Blackshirt,

as he waited, a longer period of agony before the final *dénouement*.

That he was Blackshirt he knew would be difficult to prove, but he did not underestimate the capabilities of the detectives from Scotland Yard. Bit by bit they would piece out the necessary evidence to convict; his life would be traced back to those days when he was a slum-dweller, when his only companions were young criminals like himself. They would rake up his past history, tell the bench of his drink-sodden foster-mother, of his brutal foster-father. Oh, heavens! what was the use of going over it all beforehand?

He endeavoured to think of other matters. What of the Girl on the Phone? Why did she lie to him, why did she desire to see him behind the bars? Unanswerable questions, just as were the subsequent queries which he put to himself. Who was she? What was she like? Somehow he felt she must be beautiful, for her voice was sheer delight; every time he listened to it he was thrilled by its music.

Would she, too, appear as evidence against him—she and Hepplewhaite, Nellie and the tobacconist's assistant? Why not? One or two more would not make much difference. Perhaps even Roberts would be forced into the witness-box, his damning evidence dragged from him by a dexterous prosecution.

The door of his room was flung open. Nellie stood there alone, her face chalky white, her eyes staring at him in horror.

"Blackshirt!" she gasped. "Blackshirt—you a —murderer!"

He gazed at her with an amazement which overshadowed even his own feeling of dejection; a suspicion took root in his mind that perhaps her head was affected—a feasible suggestion when he thought of her attitude toward him two hours back. Undoubtedly her appearance was not conducive to regard-

ing her in any other light unless it were that she was, as usual, acting a part.

"Miss Jones, spare me fresh hysterics, please," he said coldly.

His words seemed to sober her up somewhat, for the wild look faded away from her eyes and was succeeded by one of scorn; her lips twisted into a sneering smile.

"So you are not content to be a thief, but you are a murderer as well? I must have been mad, insane, to have imagined I could have loved a man who would commit a cold, dastardly murder for the sake of a few hundred pounds."

At any other time he might have writhed at the bitterness behind her words, but he felt too exasperated in himself to recognize anyone else's emotion. "Miss Jones, if you intend to fetch a constable to arrest me, please do so, but spare me this scene. To what you are referring I have not the slightest notion, but can only conclude that you wish to make me suffer for my admittedly brutal words some time back."

She gazed at him fixedly; a crimson flush crept into her cheeks. "Thief, murderer, cad, and now a liar! A fine sort of fellow! And yet all this time the exploits of Blackshirt have thrilled me; I had almost imagined him a kind of fairy prince. What a fool I have been!" And she laughed bitterly. "I might have known what to expect. A wolf can never hide in sheep's clothing."

His lips tightened. This was becoming unbearable. Then he realized the futility of allowing his feelings to get the better of him. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Apparently it is of little use asking for an explanation of your wild and irresponsible accusations. Perhaps later I may be able to comprehend. At the moment I confess I am utterly in the dark."

"Long words will not help you," she taunted, "either with me or with the judge, when you find

yourself up at Old Bailey. Perhaps you would rather read about yourself than listen to me. Take this!" And for the first time he became aware that she was crushing a newspaper in her hand. This she held out to him.

Then, though not until that moment, a cold shudder shook his frame. For the time being he had forgotten the brutal murder of the jeweller. Quick fear flared into his eyes as the vague possibility of a reason for her recriminations and insinuations occurred to him. With a trembling hand he snatched the paper from her grasp.

There, in inch-high letters was summarized the whole story:

BRUTAL MURDER AT CLAPHAM JUNCTION

POLICE SUSPECT NOTORIOUS CRACKSMAN

IS BLACKSHIRT THE MURDERER?

The letters dimmed and blurred before his eyes. Surely he was mad, in the midst of some wild nightmare! He—a murderer! Oh, God! That anyone should think that of him! The blood drained from his cheeks, and, despite himself, the paper rustled in his trembling fingers.

Nellie Jones laughed harshly. "Read on, Mr. Blackshirt, read of your guilty deed. Heavens! to think I—I thought I loved you." She shrank away from him.

Hypnotized by the glaring headlines, it was with difficulty that he wrenched his eyes downward to read on.

Clapham Junction was the scene of a brutal murder, committed early this morning between

the hours of three and four o'clock when a jeweller's shop belonging to Mr. John Ormond was entered, ransacked by criminals, and the unfortunate jeweller himself battered to death.

The discovery was first made by Mr. Walter Pearson, manager of the Clapham Junction branch of the Highland Whisky Stores, Limited. Mr. Pearson was in bed when he awakened to find his wife shaking his shoulder and whispering into his ear that someone had knocked at the door of their bedroom. At first he ridiculed the suggestion, but scarcely had he spoken when he, too, heard a knock. Thinking that he was probably being summoned by one of his children, who sleep on the floor above, he rose from his bed and, switching on the light, opened the door. Much to his surprise, it was not one of his own children whom he saw there, but Kathleen Ormond, the nine-year-old daughter of his next-door neighbour.

Utterly mystified by her unexpected appearance, Mr. Pearson asked her why she was there, the child did not answer, but merely gazed up with a look which Mr. Pearson described as one which "turned his blood to water." Fearing that something must be wrong Mr. Pearson determined to investigate the mystery, and upon going into his own bath-room, discovered to his utter amazement that a plank had been prised from the floor and was forming a bridge from his own window to that of the bath-room opposite belonging to the residence in which Mr. Ormond lived.

With great difficulty Mr. Pearson crossed the insecure link with the adjacent house, to discover in the hall downstairs the body of Mr. Ormond. Wisely refraining from touching anything he immediately telephoned the police station, and within a few minutes local detectives, under

the charge of Superintendent Walker, were on the spot. It was soon ascertained by the police-surgeon that the jeweller had been battered to death by means of severe blows delivered upon the head with a blunt instrument, possibly a jemmy, though without further examination he refuses to commit himself upon this point. It was plainly evident to the skilled observers that the shop had been entered by way of a ladder, borrowed from a near-by builder, and subsequently returned. Mr. Ormond, possibly awakened from his sleep by a chance sound, had pluckily investigated, only to meet his death in the brutal way already described. Nearly the whole of Mr. Ormond's stock had been cleared, which under ordinary circumstances would seem to denote that the job was the work of a gang.

Unfortunately the circumstances are far from being ordinary, for, on Kathleen Ormond being coaxed by the police-surgeon into a state in which she could answer questions put to her, a most amazing tale was unfolded.

The unfortunate child, though not a witness of the actual murder, must have been rendered uneasy by the length of Mr. Ormond's absence, for Mr. Ormond is a widower and sleeps alone with his daughter, so she went downstairs and, lighting a match, made the gruesome discovery of her father's body, covered with blood. She remembers shrieking with horror, until the terror of the tragedy overwhelmed her, and apparently she must have fainted.

Next she recollects peering into the light of an electric torch, of being raised, carried upstairs and being sat on the floor outside Mr. Pearson's door.

Despite the state of the child's mind caused by

the tragedy, her eyes were sharp enough to note that the man who carried her upstairs was dressed all in black, even having a black mask covering his face, and it is this valuable clue which leads the police to suspect that the murderer of Mr. Ormond was none other than the mysterious criminal known as Blackshirt, of whom the public have heard so much lately.

It is understood that further interesting developments are expected.

The paper fluttered to the floor. It was too ghastly, too horrible—a monstrous and sardonic travesty on the part of the newspaper. He—a murderer!

His head drooped, he put his hands to his temples as if to stop their wild throbbing. He could not think rationally. Murderer! The newspaper seemed to hurl the word at him. Murderer! He groaned, a sound which welled, unbidden, from the depths of his heart.

"So that strikes home a bit, does it?" It was Nellie's mocking voice. Its sound startled him: for the moment he had forgotten her presence; but if her words pulled him together, the essence of them filled him with a wild, irrational rage.

With a quick, jerky motion he arose from the chair into which he had sunk, and stood before her. "You think I am a murderer? My God! If you were a man I would thrust those words down your throat. I may be a thief, burglar, liar, utter scoundrel, but murderer never. Surely you do not believe that paper; you must have seen enough of me these last four months to realize that I would sooner die than willingly hurt a single soul! Look at these hands: do you honestly believe they could batter a man to death; they are clean and white: look and then tell me if you can see them all bloody?"

Uttered in the full intensity of his emotion, his words

could not fail to have their effect. At first she looked startled, but as the hot words gushed forth, piling one on top of the other in their eagerness to gain an outlet, her expression changed. When he had finished she came near, placed two hands on his shoulders and gazed into his white, strained face.

"Why, Blackshirt dear, I had not really thought. I read the paper and just imagined the worst. I will believe you—tell me you haven't been near that jeweller's at the Junction, and I will trust you sooner than all the newspaper reports in the world."

Her words chilled him for the second time. How could he say he had not been there when he had; when the child had spoken nothing less than the truth? A hint of despair crept into his voice when he answered her.

"I can't say that. I was there——" He could not continue; the words seemed choked in his throat as he watched her face, saw sneering scorn appear, then mocking disbelief.

She drew away from him, and for once her voice was natural: its strident contempt revealing all too realistically her thoughts.

"So you were there and yet you did not kill poor Mr. Ormond. You may be a liar, but not a murderer! Pah! You are both—both, Blackshirt, and I am not afraid to say so. If you think your fine acting will make any difference to what I think of you you're horribly mistaken. I suppose you will say next that little Kathleen was lying—as if the poor kid could."

He flung wide his arms desperately. "The girl spoke the truth. I carried her into the next house, but I did not murder Ormond. I found his body, saw the child there, and without counting the risk I carried her from that awful spot in case her brain should give way beneath the horror of it. Can't you believe me, Miss Jones? God knows I am telling you the truth."

Once again she looked at him strangely, but lacking a subtle imagination the coincidence of his presence seemed too strong to discredit. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Fine words! No doubt you have rehearsed them beforehand in case you should be found out. A poor chance you will have of being believed in the court. The judge and the prosecution and the public will laugh at you if you try to spin a tale like that. I should think of a better excuse if I were you."

He knew she was right. If he could not convince one who, scarcely two hours ago, had vowed she loved him, how much more difficult would it be to sway, to conquer, the impartiality of the judge, the shrewd, calculating men of the jury. What proof of innocence could he advance? None! On the contrary, if they could once prove he was in the building would that not, in itself, be sufficient circumstantial evidence to hang him? The answer was too obvious.

Only one thing could save him; the confession of the real murderer, and that was as unlikely to be forthcoming as green cheese from the moon. God! if he were but free he could at least strike a blow in his own defence; he could hunt up the real murderer, even if it took him a year, two years—and yet, how could he? What could he do to trace the thief who had burgled the jeweller's stock — and suddenly, radiantly he remembered something. The antique pendant! Trace that to its source and he would be able to lay his hands on the murderer!

Then, on second thoughts, his heart sank. How could he accomplish this when at any moment Hepplewhaite might arrive with a couple of policemen? Hepplewhaite knew him as Thomson, and therefore knew where he lived, as did the Girl on the Phone. There was but one thing in his favour. So far the police had not yet struck. If he could only get away

at once he might yet prove his innocence. If only it were not for Nellie Jones—yet—his liberty was nothing compared to the besmirching taint of murderer—rather than be believed a murderer he would do anything—anything within reason——

"Listen to me for just two minutes," he said rapidly. "I swear by all I hold precious in this life, I will swear solemnly with my hand on the Book, I will swear by any oath you may ask me, that I am innocent of this murder. Yet only one thing can prove me innocent. The arrest of the real culprit.

"If you will let me go free now, there is the barest chance that I might be able to trace the assassin. I have a clue, so faint that I dare not even mention it, yet still a clue; a pointer which may put me on the track of the callous brute. If I could do so would you still love me?"

Her eyes flickered from side to side in startled doubt, then finally they dropped before his earnest gaze. "Yes," she whispered softly, "so long as you are not a murderer, I could forgive and forget all else."

"Then, let me go free, let me prove that I am innocent, and when that is done I will return. We can marry, go abroad, and start life anew, side by side. Now—what will you do?"

She stood before him, undecided. In her heart of hearts she believed him guilty, and yet, if indeed he could prove himself innocent——

She remembered all her mother's pointed remarks, the giggles of her married friends, the years before her. A queer streak of courage entered into her soul. Marriage with Blackshirt, a Blackshirt innocent of murder, was at least worth a chance——

"Go, quickly," she whispered, "and come back to me soon."

Blackshirt laughed with pure relief. At least he

was to have a chance to fight. Actuated by a suffusing glow of gratitude he caught the girl by her shoulders, and without warning softly placed his lips upon her forehead. Before she could recover he had gently pushed her from the room.

Then he finished packing. He was going to return to the place from which, so many years ago, he had risen—the Underworld—from there, by God's will, to prove that at least Blackshirt was no murderer.

WHILE a startled London read, not without a subtle feeling of regret, of the latest crime of Blackshirt, Hepplewhaite slept, blissfully unconscious of the news. Crushed by his failure he had babbled some story or other to the police-sergeant at the station; his heart rancorous, his optimism vanished. Iron had entered into his soul; it seemed to him that he must recognize Blackshirt to be invincible. Of what use his puny tactics against the colossal preparedness of Blackshirt who could counter every move of the game, who could foresee, with a clearsightedness little short of miraculous, every twist and turn of his opponent's plans?

Embittered with the acid poignancy of defeat, it had been on the tip of the reporter's tongue to tell the station sergeant all he knew of Blackshirt's identity, his address, and of his accomplice at Park 00343, but some instinct restrained him; it was as if some sixth sense warned him to keep the discovery a secret, combating common sense which cautioned him that by so doing he was making himself an accessory to the criminal, knowledge of which might at any time reach the ever-open ears at Scotland Yard. Supposing the tobacconist's assistant at Wandsworth were to come into contact with the police, for instance——

Eventually pure obstinacy won the mental battle—despite all his rebuffs he determined to carry on—and so the tale which was noted in the station diary verged on the side of imagination, and leaned not in the direction of veracity!

In the early hours of the morning he returned home, tired and despondent, and crept into bed by the side

of his wife. As quiet as he was, she awoke; he felt her soft arm slip round him, and in a sudden excess of emotion his own arms enveloped and drew her toward him so that their lips could mingle. It was for her his heart ached. If he should lose his position, what of her? With his thoughts torturing him thus, he endeavoured to relapse into sleep.

For some time he failed. Mortification and chagrin at his new defeat, hatred for the All-Highest for his callousness, and Blackshirt for his invincibility: these fierce mental provocations took their toll of his repose. In his agony he turned and tossed from side to side, until at last his brain became numb, and eventually he tumbled into a fitful doze.

Noon had passed before he awoke, for his wife, aware that he was on a special assignment, and therefore, for the present, master of his own time, let him sleep on. Consequently, when he opened his eyes it was to see the sun blazing high in the heavens, to smell the appetizing odours of luncheon cooking. He tumbled out of bed: a clear cold bath temptingly awaited him, and after he emerged from it, his skin glowing healthily, he felt fresher and cleaner both mentally and physically; more in a position to think things over rationally.

Downstairs the morning papers awaited him, and amusingly it occurred to him that for once he could read a newspaper peacefully without being aware of most of the news.

Lunch wanting still fifteen minutes or so for completion, he settled himself in a chair and opened the paper, and so, with a throbbing heart, read of the murder of the jeweller. When he had finished the paper fluttered heedlessly from his fingers, while he stared across the room, his face set and white.

A poor, helpless man murdered, killed in cold blood —and he (Hepplewhaite) indirectly the cause of it.

He glanced appealingly from side to side, from floor to ceiling, but all the time he could see only the headlines, the inch-high letters which mutely accused him of his responsibility.

To him then it seemed a heavy price to pay for his accursed pride and obstinacy. If he had not thought so much of his own glory, his own advancement, he would have told the police the truth about Blackshirt. Was it so very unlikely that within ten minutes or so of having imparted the news a watch would have been put upon the house where Thomson lived, and the man himself arrested? If he had done so Blackshirt might possibly have been put under arrest, and the life of the jeweller spared.

There was no doubt in Hepplewhaite's mind that Blackshirt was guilty; carrying the child across the narrow plank to the house of the neighbour, knocking on the door to attract the sleeper's attention; that in itself was damning evidence against the criminal, it was so characteristic of his dare-devilry, of his skill and daring, and essentially of his underlying chivalry.

Strangely enough the news hurt Hepplewhaite—Blackshirt a murderer! Somehow it was as if the world had suddenly assumed a black cloak; there was something wrong with life if it could induce a man like Blackshirt to commit such a callous crime. It was so unlike him, so unworthy of him!

Hepplewhaite laughed bitterly as he realized the trend of his thoughts. Last night he had hated Blackshirt; now in his innermost being he was defending him! Well, why not? At least let the scale of justice balance fairly, for if his illegal deeds, and even the last great wrong, balanced one side down almost beyond all hope of adjustment, at any rate the opposite scale was not bare of weight.

What of the lives he had saved when he had braved the flames, risked his own liberty to save the Meyer

family from the raging furnace which broke out on the floor below? What of the maid, cut off, in the absence of the fire-escape, from all possible hope of rescue? Had he not saved her, performed the unbelievable feat of carrying her down a drain-pipe to which other people would scarcely dare trust themselves, let alone support a helpless woman in the bargain?

By one of the biggest streaks of luck Hepplewhaite had been one of the crowd that night and had seen all. Worked up by the drama, he had become conscious of a deep regard for the criminal, and when it became known that Blackshirt had actually entered the Meyer house to return jewels to the safe from which he had previously stolen them, his enthusiasm went beyond all limits, and the *Evening Star* featured Blackshirt henceforward as a hero rather than a criminal.

Admittedly it was a Press "stunt," but nevertheless there was born in Hepplewhaite's heart that night a sincere admiration for Blackshirt, which had lasted until the criminal's liberty threatened not only his own future, but that of his wife and the child that was soon to come into the world, and his feelings changed to what he had imagined to be hatred.

Hatred! Now he knew it was not so. Had he hated Blackshirt the previous night when he had the other man in his power? On the contrary, he had felt a modicum of regret though, as after events proved, it was wasted. No wonder Blackshirt had been quite calm, when he knew that rescue was close at hand! Yet had he known it? Somehow Hepplewhaite believed the answer to be in the negative. Himself a reader of character, he had seen, even through the slits in the black mask, the light of—of what?—which had entered into Blackshirt's eyes. Was it despair, hopelessness, fury? No, none of these. It was more a philosophical acceptance of Fate's twist, in which, however, had been a suspicion of regret that his end was near. That

was it—frank regret! Nothing else; not timidity, not fear, nor any other emotion of that sort, but just that touch of regret which had caused the reporter to feel a cad for capturing him as he had done.

He was a murderer! Undoubtedly it seemed wrong, somehow! There must have been provocation, perhaps a struggle. Blackshirt would not kill for the sake of a few paltry gems.

So Hepplewhaite summed Blackshirt up. Guilty, but under extenuating circumstances!

Now there was his duty to be done. After lunch, Scotland Yard! Nevertheless, the reporter ate his lunch with a heavy heart. In the first case he did not relish the interview which he would have to undergo, and beside, there was his conscience, which laid a heavy pall upon his spirits.

By the time he reached the station, *en route* for Westminster and Scotland Yard, the third editions of the evening papers were out. Hepplewhaite, wise in the ways of Fleet Street, did not need to be told that the murder sensation would be played to the limit in the evening Press, so he purchased a copy of the *International* as well as a copy of the paper of which he was one of the staff.

First of all, he opened out the *International*.

NEW LIGHT ON MURDER MYSTERY

POLICE FOLLOWING UP IMPORTANT CLUES

BLACKSHIRT'S DENIAL

The hints of important developments concerning the murder of the jeweller at Clapham Junction, which were promised in the daily newspapers, have been amply fulfilled, for the police are in possession of clues which suggest that the criminal

popularly known as Blackshirt was the murderer of the defenceless man whose only crime was that of protecting his own goods.

Foremost among the crop of new sensations already provided is the news that Blackshirt only escaped capture earlier in the evening by the carelessness of a journalist on the staff of the *Evening Star*. According to police accounts, Mr. Hepplewhaite, the reporter in question, rang up Hendon Police Station at one o'clock a.m. this morning to the effect that he had captured Blackshirt and was holding him prisoner pending the arrival of constables to formally arrest him. Two policemen were instantly despatched, but although they arrived at the address given by Mr. Hepplewhaite in less than four minutes, it was to find that the elusive criminal had already slipped through Mr. Hepplewhaite's weak defences, as he has done so often during the last few months.

Mr. Hepplewhaite's story to the police-sergeant at Hendon Police Station was that he was returning home along Windsor Road when he saw a suspicious character whom he believed to be Blackshirt entering No. 36. Instead of immediately communicating with the nearest constable, Mr. Hepplewhaite decided to investigate upon his own account, doubtless believing that it was an ideal opportunity of achieving the glory of Blackshirt's capture, for which he has so long been working. Consequently, although he was successful in obtaining the upper hand of the criminal long enough to telephone the police for reinforcements, he was not capable of sustaining his victory, for in less than three minutes, according to his own story, he was attacked by an unsuspected accomplice, with the result that Blackshirt escaped without further difficulty.

Is it pertinent to point out, therefore, that if Mr. Hepplewhaite had thought less of the renown of himself and the *Evening Star*, Blackshirt and his accomplice would both have been arrested, and possibly the life of the unfortunate jeweller saved?

In the meantime diligent inquiries by Scotland Yard have already traced Blackshirt's movements from the time of his escape from Mr. Hepplewhaite to a few minutes before the murder was discovered, and little more proof is apparently necessary to establish the presence of Blackshirt in the neighbourhood of Clapham Junction this morning, so that it now remains for the police to redouble their efforts to lay their hands upon the criminal to question him fully on his movements last night.

There have been made several attempts in the past to minimize the criminal tendencies of this master-crook and exaggerate the halo of heroism which has unaccountably grown up around him, and it is possibly these undignified efforts which have prompted the suspected murderer to commit one of the most callous actions imaginable, for in a letter addressed to one of our contemporaries this murderer coolly insinuates that the police have misjudged him, denies that he is a murderer, and bombastically announces his intentions to bring about the arrest of the real assassin. Such a letter is an insult to the intelligence of the newspaper-reading public, and we cannot too strongly urge our readers not to let their sympathies be swayed by attempts at mock-heroism and melodrama, which, we need scarcely add, the police are treating in the proper spirit.

Hepplewhaite groaned. To be publicly indicted was worse than he had ever imagined, yet he might have known that the *International* would have twisted the

matter around to suit their own ends. For many years the *Evening Star* and the *International* had been rivals, and if the *Evening Star* had, so far, come off victor in the majority of the clashes between the two newspapers, the same could not be said to be the case this time. For once the *International* had definitely scored, and when Hepplewhaite pictured in his imagination the face of the "All-Highest"——

Fear flickered in his eyes. Sir John was unforgiving. How would he accept the *International's* sneer? Desperately he turned to the *Evening Star;* anything rather than let his thoughts play havoc with him.

In Hepplewhaite's absence the chief had himself handled the matter. Blackshirt's letter was featured in large print:

> *To the Editor of the "Evening Star."*
>
> SIR,
>
> In the past you have been good enough to give me space in your valuable columns, and I beg of you to do so once again, even if it be for the last time.
>
> I do not attempt to disguise the fact that I am a suspected murderer, and yet, God knows, of such a cruel and heartless deed I am perfectly innocent. I swear on oath that I am guiltless, and, moreover, to prove it I shall not rest content until the real murderer has been brought to justice, either through the instrumentality of the police or through my own efforts.
>
> BLACKSHIRT.

To Hepplewhaite, who had in a small way attempted to study the psychology of Blackshirt, there was a ring of sincerity which gave him cause to wonder whether, indeed, the writer was guilty of the crime, though at the same time he realized that to the majority it would read as a flamboyant gesture by a heartless scoundrel.

He did not know the reason, but, deeply engrossed in the mystery of the murder, an idea flickered into his brain all at once. It seemed so absurd that he had not thought of it before that he chuckled to himself. Park 00343! The telephone number which Blackshirt was in the habit of ringing up daily, the number which presumably connected him with his confederate! Trace the owner of the number, and there would be a new clue, a new method of approaching Blackshirt.

In his newly found excitement the train seemed to move with a tantalizing slowness, but at length Westminster was reached, and, darting from it, he hurried up the stairs to the street level, and dived into a telephone booth which fortunately happened to be empty.

"Inquiries, please, miss," he said to the girl at the exchange.

In less than two minutes he was called and given the information for which he had asked.

"Park 00343 is the telephone number of Sir Allen Dunn, of 15, Maybrick Avenue."

With a puzzled frown he thanked the girl and left the booth. Sir Allen Dunn! The name was familiar. And then, suddenly, he remembered. It was Sir Allen Dunn's daughter who had married Richard Verrell, the author.

Engulfed by surprise which paralyzed him in its unexpectedness, he faltered in his walk. Without warning he had joined up two arcs and rounded a circle; he was back once again where he had begun his investigations, and that spot represented Richard Verrell.

Richard Verrell, the writer of criminal stories, the amateur criminologist—and the criminal! Roberts, the twice-sentenced burglar—the accomplice, the other man who had been Hepplewhaite's undoing the previous evening! Park 00343, the home of Mrs.

Verrell, the number which Blackshirt telephoned every morning so regularly!

The disconnected clues now suddenly interlocked, and the pieces of the human jig-saw puzzle became a completed picture.

If there were one or two other points to be solved, what matter; the main fact was apparent enough. What if it were a little beyond his comprehension why Blackshirt should live apart from his wife at Wandsworth, and under another name? Doubtless that little mystery would be solved in due course.

Victory at last! Victory without a doubt! No more need to worry about his position. To-day he would score the biggest scoop in the history of Fleet Street. His would be the hand to expose the elusive Blackshirt, the man on whom the Yard had so long failed to lay their clutches, the man who had defied the whole nation to catch him. Yet he, Hepplewhaite, had succeeded where everybody else had failed.

No necessity even to go to Scotland Yard! Scotland Yard would learn soon enough, but from the columns of the *Evening Star*, so that all the world might know from where they received the information which would, doubtless, lead eventually to the arrest of the cracksman.

It was a light step with which Hepplewhaite walked into the editorial offices of his paper, it was a blithe tune which he hummed.

The first person he saw was Johnny; the boy had a white, scared face. When Johnny saw the journalist he halted. "Gawd streuth! Mr. Hepplewhaite, there you are. The All-Highest wants you. He ain't a bit barmy, not 'arf, he's just raving, tearing mad; mad as a 'atter. Gawd help you! He's nearly given me the sack."

Hepplewhaite laughed lightly, and patted the lad on the back. "Cheer up, Johnny!" he urged, "you

see his sunshiny face after he has seen me. A rainbow won't be in it." So saying he veered toward the chief's office, and, tapping upon the door, entered.

The chief's face was set and a trifle white, in strong contrast to the physiognomy of Sir John, which was scowling, and purple with rage.

Evidently he had been storming: his mouth was half open showing his teeth, one hand was smashing into the palm of the other, and so he stood while he glared at Hepplewhaite. For a second or so there was a portentous silence; then the storm broke.

"So there you are at last, sir, and now what have you to say for yourself? You have ruined the reputation of the *Evening Star;* the paper is the laughing-stock of Fleet Street, of all the world. How dare you have permitted such a thing to happen, sir! Apparently you believe your position entitles you to liberties which even I would not dare to take, I who am chairman of the board of directors. It does not matter to you, of course, whether our circulation figures go up or down so long as you receive your salary, but it shall matter to you, sir! It shall matter! What have you to say for yourself? Don't stand there like a mummy! Do you think I am here for your amusement? I suppose you let that damned crook get away on purpose!" He had to stop at length for lack of breath.

By now Hepplewhaite's face was as white as the chief's, just as drawn and set. His eyes glittered with an anger which he restrained from bursting its bounds only with an effort of will.

"It was not my fault, Sir John, I had thought——"

"Of course it was not your fault! Nothing ever is, Mr. Hepplewhaite, with you. I should have thought by this time you would have been prepared for any surprise move on the part of Blackshirt. First you let him get away from you at Lady Kingston's, then

at that garden-party which Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot gave, and now again you have permitted him to slip through your hands."

"I am sorry, Sir John, but——" Desperately he endeavoured to give an explanation.

"Sorry, of course you are sorry," the All-Highest bellowed, "and you will be sorrier still, Mr. Hepplewhaite, because I am advising the board to accept your resignation which you will be good enough to send in immediately. I will give instructions to the cashier to pay you the usual month's salary to give you time to look for a fresh situation."

Hepplewhaite gazed aghast at the other man. He could not believe his ears. To be dismissed without being allowed a word of explanation in his own defence! His heart felt cold and numb.

"But, Sir John, I can explain. I have good news——"

"No explanations are necessary, Mr. Hepplewhaite. However satisfactory they may be, I doubt they will serve to disperse the scornful laughter of my contemporaries, and the incalculable harm which will probably be done to our circulation. Even if you have good news, I do not want to hear it. God only knows why I allowed myself to be drawn into all your other madcap schemes; they have done us harm enough. Be good enough to terminate the interview, Mr. Hepplewhaite. I can see it is painful to us both."

Hepplewhaite felt unable to move. What would happen to Barbara? When the time came—— He choked suddenly. Perhaps it would mean she would have to go into a free hospital. Anything rather than that! He determined to make one more effort to persuade the All-Highest to listen to him.

"Please, Sir John, won't you hear my explanation? At the present time dismissal is too terrible. I am married; some time next month we are expecting a

little one. I have done nothing of which I need be ashamed, for at all times it has been only to secure a 'scoop' for the *Evening Star* for which I have worked. For the sake of my baby, Sir John, won't you reconsider your decision and listen to what I have to say?" He hurried out the words, for he saw the All-Highest spluttering.

"I am naturally sorry to hear what you tell me, Mr. Hepplewhaite, but I cannot see my way for the sake of sentimentality to underestimate the harm you have done. I do not doubt that you will soon find another position. There are several publications which lay themselves out for pure sensationalism," he finished spitefully.

There was obviously nothing more to be said. Without a word the journalist made his exit, and walked unsteadily toward his room. There was an almost uncanny stillness within, and as Hepplewhaite entered every eye was rapidly turned in his direction. One look at his face was enough to acquaint them of what had happened, and in sympathy they glanced as quickly away. "Damned old skinflint!" murmured one, but he was the only one to speak.

Hepplewhaite crossed blindly over to his table, his lower lip quivering. He sank into the chair, then took a pencil in his hand, and made a pretence of studying the litter of papers, but his eyes were unseeing. A month's salary, and a few odd pounds in the bank, were his only assets. What of his liabilities? Keep for his wife and himself until he found a new job, soon the expenses of a little one; and as though that were not enough, there was due the quarterly rent to the Building Society, and a year's life insurance.

He laughed bitterly, while his eyes read and re-read the papers before him, without consciously comprehending a single word, and gazed perhaps for five minutes at an envelope which was propped up against his type-

writer before he realized that it was addressed to him.

He opened this listlessly; anything to occupy his thoughts. The next moment his rage bubbled over; he felt the blood burning into his cheeks, while his eyes misted. The signature was that of Blackshirt, the cause of his troubles.

It was some time before his eyes cleared sufficiently to read the letter, but presently the film dissolved, and he was enabled to study the lines before him.

MR. HEPPLEWHAITE,

By this time you will have read my letter to your paper, yet once again I repeat to you: 'I am innocent.' My memory goes back to nearly twelve hours ago when I was in your power; I thought you had me then; but for a faithful friend, the victory would indeed have been yours. At any rate, even in your triumph you were sympathetic. Believe me, I appreciated your words more than you may imagine, and it is because of that I am writing to you now, firstly, to ask of you a favour; and secondly, if I can, to reciprocate your kindness.

From all you said last night, from the way you trapped me, I gather my identity is more or less common knowledge to you. You are, therefore, in a position to do me immense harm; it is you who can give the police sufficient information to lead them on my track. In all sincerity, I ask you, therefore, to withhold such information long enough to enable me to prove my innocence. Beyond that I ask nothing.

For my part I will keep in touch with you. Sooner or later I mean to trace the brutal ruffian whose crime is laid at my door. When that time comes it is to you to whom I shall first impart the

information, and you will be able to effect a sufficiently big "scoop" to keep you in clover for many years.

BLACKSHIRT.

As the waves break and settle beneath the calming influence of oil, so did Hepplewhaite find his temper vanishing as he read the letter. Sincerity seemed to underline every word of it, and in spite of the promptings from his more level head, his heart began to lean toward the belief that, as much as circumstantial evidence might prove to the contrary, Blackshirt was innocent of murder.

If so, how did he himself stand? The case was different to what it had been half an hour ago. Dismissed ignominiously from the staff, he owed nothing to the *Evening Star*. Supposing he were in a position to pass on the solution of the murder mystery to, say, the *London Globe*, would not the directors be too glad to take him on their staff? After all, among his cronies on "The Street" he had somewhat of a reputation, and though, under ordinary circumstances, he might find it more difficult to nail down a new job, with such a handle—the tracking of the real murderer in the face of public opinion which had already condemned Blackshirt—he could demand one as his price for the scoop.

In brief, he argued to himself, he had nothing to lose and everything to win. Even if Blackshirt were bluffing, he himself would be no worse off, while on the other hand—— The prospect of scoring over Sir John was too much for him, and all his doubts disappeared. Henceforward he would work with Blackshirt, no longer against him; and he laughed aloud at the paradox, much to Johnny's surprise, who happened to look at him at that moment.

* * * * *

Meantime, while events were moving at the *Evening Star*, a strange figure was making his way toward the East End of London. Wearing buttoned boots, navy blue trousers decidedly the worse for wear, a fisherman's guernsey, torn and patched in places, a dusty and ill-fitting navy blue coat, on his head an old cap pulled down well over his eyes, Verrell was so utterly unlike the trim and neat figure he usually presented that even Bobbie might not have recognized him, for he looked a typical seafaring man, seedy and unkempt through either lack of employment or the consequence of drink, consumed neither wisely nor moderately.

His slouching gait, the twist of his lips, the furtive gleam in his eyes were all part of the picture, as were his filthy nails, his grimy hands. It was a masterpiece of disguise, and Blackshirt knew that meanwhile he could move in comparative safety. For how long? was the question. Within a few minutes he would be in the centre of a neighbourhood he knew well, where every man minded his own business, where no man asked or answered questions, and yet where even one's best friend was mistrusted, looked upon with suspicion lest he should be a "nark" or a "dip."

Once there, and not alone would the policemen, and the detectives from Scotland Yard be his enemies, for every man he passed would mark him for a stranger, shun him as he would the devil.

Every lowering glance, every shifty side-look would sum him up, categorize him, and until his station was known, the whisper of it passed round from mouth to mouth, every hand would be against him, every man his foe.

How well he knew the streets he was now traversing! Memories of his boyhood in these hideous, drab surroundings flooded his recollection. Here, in this district, he had spent fourteen or fifteen years of his life, years of mental and physical torture which, even now, he

could not conjure up in his mind without having to repress a shudder. Every road, every corner and turning, every alley, every house was known to him; there was scarcely a square yard which did not cause some recollection of the past to flash into his memory.

There, for instance, in the Jolly Sailor Boys, Alf and his slatternly wife used to drink away "Dicky's" earnings, while Dicky himself, an innocent little, blue-eyed lad of seven, used to wander in and out of the bemused revellers and slip nimble fingers into yawning pockets and help himself to what coins were still left therein.

Of all the different classes and types of crime which his foster-father had forced him to commit, and ground him into perfection, the perfection which comes of constant practice, pocket-picking was the one Dicky hated most of all. Even to him in those early days he had thought it mean and contemptible. Alf had no such scruples: all he wanted was money, and still more money, to supply beer for himself and stout and gin for Lizzie. Any day that Dicky returned empty-handed meant a night of torture for the offender, for Alf had brawny arms and a pliable strap, and Verrell could still remember the cruel bite of the thong as it lashed his bare flesh.

Was it a matter of wonder, therefore, that his fingers grew dexterous, that his soul developed daring and reckless hazard? Was it surprising that after such years it was easy for him to "lift" the pearl necklace from Mrs. Pendelbury and the diamond pendant from Lady Ballintyre?

Suddenly his thoughts raced away again. He was passing a dark alley-way, where he had once hidden from a pursuing constable. He had been almost caught, but his young legs were just a trifle fleeter, and, reaching the darkness of the alley, he had cut off into it and away from sight.

Just farther on toward the lamp-post on the opposite side of the road was the place where he had "frisked" a gold presentation watch from a man whom he afterwards discovered to be a "bizzi," better known as a detective, while scarcely five yards away, and within as many months he had secured a second gold watch, this time from a man in a top hat and frock coat. When the theft was discovered a howl went up from the denizens of the district, and Verrell learned that a doctor was taboo, the one man who could come and go as he pleased.

Without doubt the neighbourhood had changed; it was not quite so ghastly as it had been in the days when Verrell had lived there. For instance, he saw a solitary policeman strolling quietly on his beat. Verrell remembered the time when constables walked in pairs. There were not so many paneless windows, fewer broken doors; the kiddies were better dressed, the women less drab and drunken looking.

He realized everything had changed for the better, though still it was an eyesore, a blot on the landscape of an otherwise clean, if ugly, city. In some ways, too, the men had altered. They were inclined to look more healthy, their clothes, like the women's, were less tattered and torn, and in general appearance they were not such ruffians and brutal-looking bullies, the type of Bill Sykes which Dickens had drawn so well, the species of which his foster-father had been.

At last he reached his destination, the centre of a district which he knew well as one which sheltered fully half the habitual criminals of London. Somewhere in its teeming streets he hoped to find a clue to the murderer of the jeweller. A chance word, a drunken boast; however light the wind which might blow a pointing straw, however frail the thread which might lead through the maze, he would follow, even if it led to the end of all things.

First of all, it was necessary to find a temporary lodging, but he anticipated no difficulty on this score. If old Ma Harrigan, or her shrewish daughter, were still alive, he knew he would find a bed.

In answer to Verrell's ring, Jane Harrigan appeared at the door, her face hardened and straighter than ever, her expression still more vinegary.

"Well, watcher want?" she asked, her piercing gaze boring into his.

"Watcher think, Beauty?" he growled, calling her by an old nickname. "I want a doss for a few nights."

"Oh, does yer? Well, I ain't got one, so yer'll 'ave to try somewhere else."

"Aw! stow it, Beauty. Don't pull none of that gaff on me, 'cause yer don't know me. I ain't been in the old town for the last few years, but I remember you and old Ma Harrigan. Where's yer old ma? Bet she'udd take me in, even if I 'ad to doss in the sink."

"Ma's sleepin' for good."

Verrell spat. "Poor old gel!" he murmured. "What about it, Beauty, for old time's sake?"

"All right, then; but no hanky-panky tricks. No drunks ain't allowed in this 'ere 'ouse, and don't you forget it, my boy."

"Keep your 'air on, and don't worry abart me. Wot I got to dub up?"

"Three bob a night."

Verrell whistled. "You ain't put it up, I don't fink. Old Ma Harrigan only charged a bob and a joey."

She shrugged her shoulders. "If you don't like it, leave it." She started pushing the door to, so Verrell hastily inserted his foot.

"Orlright, Beauty; I got a bit to spare at the moment. Tell yer abart it later on." And, pushing

the door with his arm so that he could enter, he passed within. And so returned Blackshirt to the haunts where he had, perforce, spent his early childhood.

* * * * *

The days passed by, and the country raised a united howl for the arrest of Blackshirt. Solidly, with one exception, the newspapers assured their readers that Blackshirt was the suspected murderer, skirting as near as they dared the border-line of criminal libel or contempt of court.

Day after day the police were attacked for their apparent inability to handle the situation; leader-writers clamoured for inquiries, for news of official progress, anything to keep the sensation at fire-heat, for without a doubt the murder was a *cause célèbre*. For so long had Blackshirt been featured in the newspapers that he was the person of notoriety, and all of a sudden he was credited with crime after crime, so far unsolved, until he was likened by many to a Napoleon of crime, a veritable Moriarty, a superman possessing the tactics of Jim the Penman, the skill of Frank Kent, the luck of Max Shinburn, the genius of Adam Worth, and the brutality of Landru.

Foremost in the aggression was, naturally, the *Evening Star*. With a policy dictated for once by the All-Highest, its columns rampaged and screamed, alternately demanded and pleaded, for the capture of the impudent scoundrel Blackshirt, and the public laughed at the sudden change of front, and ceased to buy the paper, sickening at the virulent articles against the police, in whom, after all, they had the greatest confidence, even if a failure were recorded at infrequent intervals.

The one exception was the *London Globe*. Time after time it pointed out that the very foundation of British justice is that every man is innocent until he

is proved guilty, and until Blackshirt was proved guilty of the vile murder the policy of the *London Globe* would be to point out that as often as not circumstantial evidence had proved itself faulty, and that they agreed with the coroner's inquest on the unfortunate tradesman, which had resulted in a verdict of murder against a person or persons unknown.

Hepplewhaite was behind the scenes at the *London Globe*. After two hours' argument he had persuaded the editor to adopt the attitude of defence on behalf of Blackshirt, successfully pointing out that such a quiet, conservative attitude could not hurt the paper, while leaving the door open to swing either way when events progressed further. Nor did he have any difficulty in securing a promise of a permanent job if he could rake in the promised scoop, though he was led to understand that should he fail—— It was put politely, but the undercurrent was there. To join the *London Globe*, Hepplewhaite must pay the promised price!

In the meantime Blackshirt's heart was filled with bitterness. To the underworld he was guilty; there was not man, woman, nor child to say a word in his defence, for between Blackshirt and the underworld there was no love lost! Not yet had it been forgotten that because of Blackshirt Sniffy Tomkins had gone into "quod," and Blackshirt was hated, not only for his peaching, but also for his dress clothes, his superior methods. Gentlemen crooks were not recognized among the ranks of the more humble brethren of the craft.

Guilty! Murderer! As the days passed by the two words haunted him, rang in his ears day and night, were echoed and re-echoed wherever he went, until his natural gaiety gradually vanished, and a sullen gloom settled over him, and a renewed hatred for the world was reborn in his soul. So had he felt when he first returned from France, an emotion which

had, in time, dissolved of its own accord, but now it returned in full measure; more than full, in fact, for it was a hundred times worse.

These feelings were aggravated by long communings which he held with himself from lack of other company. There was no one with whom he could talk, nobody to whom he might chat naturally. He had always to be on his guard, careful of every word, suspicious of everyone who spoke to him.

During this time he relentlessly pursued his quest. In the daytime there were "fences" to visit, and in particular Isaac Slavinsky. Slavinsky might have been described as the king of fences. From his pawnbroker's shop he controlled a wonderful organization, of which the wide ramifications were known only to himself, who, as a benevolent old gentleman, sat in his little office, his very innocence provoking the police to continued efforts to catch him tripping, but without the slightest success. They knew well how old Isaac made his money, but without proof they were helpless.

Verrell knew Slavinsky; in the old days he had exchanged many wanted pieces of jewellery for solid gold sovereigns, and, more lately, soiled Treasury notes, but that Slavinsky should never recognize him he always went disguised. Therefore, when he entered the pawnbroker's shop, Isaac looked at him suspiciously from under his bushy, white eyebrows.

"'Ullo, old Isaac," greeted Verrell, talking through the side of his mouth. "I have a message for yer from an old pal of yourn."

"Inteet, yes!" Slavinsky raised his eyebrows. "And vat may you be vanting, may I ask?"

"You remember Shifty Jim?"

Isaac rubbed his hands together and shrugged his shoulders. "I haf nefer heard of zat chentlemans, but perhaps you vill come into my lettle office; one can talk more easily."

Verrell grinned and followed the old man in.

Inside, Isaac turned to him. "Vell, and vat about zis chentlemans vat I haf nefer heard of?"

"Nuthin', but old Shifty Jim says to me, 'e says, when I was speakin' to 'im some time back: 'When yer wants anything special, go to old Uncle Slavinsky, Isaac Slavinsky what keeps the pop-shop on the corner of King's Road.' That's you, ain't it, mister?"

"Vell, and vat then?"

"Well, Jim says to me, says 'e: 'Or if you want to pop a little something what might come your way, old Uncle Slavinsky's a generous old bloke what might give you a quid or two to keep you going.' That's you, ain't it?"

"Maype, young man, maype." And he nodded his head solemnly.

Verrell sank his voice to a confidential whisper. "Well, Uncle Isaac, this is my lay. I've given up being a second story merchant; it's a mug's game, nohow. I've become a sailor wot goes on them liners to and fro to New York. One time I was over there I met a bloke wot proposes a little scheme to me for making a few extra dibs. 'E tells me as 'ow them there rich Yanks will pay anythin' for antiques, any bloomin' kind of antiques you can think of. Then he says as 'ow can't I, every time I gets back to England, lay me 'ands on some old antique stuff, and 'e'll turn it into money. Of course, I mean small stuff wot I can hide in me clothes.

"That's all right, but I can't get the stuff cheap enough. Wot's the use of makin' a quid or two at a time? Now, I thinks to myself, thinks I, supposin' old Uncle Slavinsky could get 'old of some of that stuff, me and 'im could go 'alves." Verrell winked his eye. "I bet Uncle Isaac's got got some stuff 'e don't know wot to do wiv, eh, Uncle? The worse of these

'ere antiques is that they can be traced too easily, wot wiv them bizzies all over the blinkin' shop."

The expression on the other's face never altered. "Maype, my friend, maype. Come back again in a week, and I vill see vat I haf in stock."

So Verrell left, knowing well during that week Isaac Slavinsky would dig deep into the history of Dick Smith, which was the name he had given to Jane Harrigan. If he made the slightest slip now he would be unmasked, so he drew still more into his own shell.

Not only did he give this story to Slavinsky, but to others, most of whom promised to keep an eye open. It was a slender chance on which he banked, but Verrell recognized the fact, and scarcely dared to hope that it would bear result, though at least it was a chance, and he meant to leave no possible stone unturned. It meant, too, that he had many eyes on the lookout for the antique pendant, leaving him free to pursue inquiries in other directions.

Then, one day, walking back to Jane Harrigan's, he became subtly aware that something was wrong. He cast his mind about to discover the reason, and in doing so it flashed across him what was the matter. Twice in ten minutes he had glanced casually behind him, and each time had seen a lounging figure some fifty yards behind, looking into a window. He was being followed!

At the thought of danger all his nerves thrilled, and he grinned. There was no doubt in his mind that the man who was apparently following him was a detective, and he could guess the reason. Some dip or other had probably reported the appearance in the underworld of an unknown personality, and the 'tec behind was tracking him to make further inquiries.

It took him just fifteen minutes to shake the man off his trail. Then he headed back to Jane Harrigan's.

She met him on the doorstep. "A note come for yer," she said. "You'd better read it quick."

Verrell felt his heart pounding at the shock of her words. How could he receive a note when, so far as he knew, there was not a soul in the wide world who knew where he was? Somehow he managed to hide his dismay from his keen-eyed landlady, and turned to his bed.

There, on his pillow, was a dirty envelope addressed to "Dick Smith." He laughed more easily at the sight of it. Perhaps a note from Uncle Isaac, or one of the others. He slit it open. Inside was a piece of common squared paper, folded in half. Eagerly he opened it out.

> Leave Harrigan's as quickly as you can. Detectives will raid it to-night to question you. Danger!
>
> YOUR LADY OF THE PHONE.

He could not believe his eyesight. Surely it was too utterly impossible. How could she, the Girl on the Phone, know he was at Harrigan's? How could she know, also, that detectives were on their way there? His sensitive nostrils twitched. There was the faintest aroma still lingering about the rough paper, as though her hand had lightly brushed it and yet left behind a delicious memory. The perfume must have been exquisite; even what faint fragrance still remained assured him of that.

For some reason or other it caused his heart to leap painfully; for the moment it reminded him of the days which seemed so far off, and yet were not, when he was Richard Verrell, noted author, when he mixed with men and women of the world, men of intellect, women of feminine charm. Was she, the Girl on the Phone, one of those women? Surely yes, he answered to him-

self, for he recognized the fact that the scent was expensive, possibly exclusive and rare.

He found himself sitting on the bed, gazing away into space, his forehead creasing into lines of regret—and with a shock realized that his mind had wandered. What of the warning?

Under ordinary circumstances he would not have heeded it, for had she not twice betrayed him? And yet—following so soon upon the heels of the discovery that he was being followed, it was stamped with the hall-mark of veracity. Beside, why should she trouble to warn him; if it were her intention to trap him she could have let matters stand as they were; he would have been questioned, perhaps arrested, and in due course his identity discovered.

Somehow the Girl on the Phone puzzled him. He hated her, mistrusted her, yet—he could not disguise to himself the fact that he was always welcome to listen to the sound of her voice over the telephone, and was more than ready to accept any explanation she might give to him to excuse any action of hers which did not seem to him to be above suspicion. Why did she raise such conflicting emotions in his breast?

In perplexity he arose from the bed and approached the window, and still with his thoughts fixed upon the mysterious being who seemed to know his every move, gazed abstractedly down upon the squalid street. Someone stirred, and instantly he was on the alert. His eyes narrowed slightly, for unless he were mistaken, the man who had disappeared into the shelter of a doorway some way down the road was the man who had been following him. Evidently his efforts to shake the detective off were not, as he had believed, successful.

Danger! The Girl on the Phone—or, as by some coincidence the intricacies of which he could not conceive, his Lady of the Phone, as she called herself—

had not exaggerated. There was danger, and the sooner he steered himself clear of Jane Harrigan's the better. There was another place he knew, deeper still into the depths of the criminal underworld, where he could remain even better hidden. He would rather have kept clear of it, for it would be a veritable hornet's nest he would have to enter, but it was a case of Hobson's choice! The hurried warning, the detective outside——

He had no belongings to gather up. All that it was necessary to do was to warn Jane Harrigan. Jane was downstairs, peeling potatoes.

"Sorry, Beauty, I got ter 'op it, a bizzi outside. The cops is after me."

She laughed sourly. "I thought yer was up ter no good." Then, unexpectedly, her face softened. "Well, ta ta, Dicky. 'Opes you 'ave the best of luck. I'll 'andle the blasted flatties when they comes knocking around. Best use the back way." With that she opened the door by her side, and let him out.

He found himself in a minute courtyard. On each side of him stretched other similar cemented areas, opposite were more yards and houses, no lane dividing them. Evidently the way to the street was via the neighbour's precincts, so he quickly climbed the fence and dropped into next door. This he repeated until he arrived in one yard in which was a woman, washing.

Seeing Verrell she grinned. "The cops?" she queried.

"Yus," he replied briefly.

"Norty boy, wot you bin a-doin' of? Your mama ought ter give yer a good spankin'. Trot along then, and good luck."

He clambered over or through another half a dozen fences, and then was into the street. Here he was more cautious, but though he raked the neighbourhood with a keen scrutiny, he could see no sign of the

detective, so he ventured into the road and made his way with the utmost caution toward his new retreat, and though he still kept a wary eye open, he allowed his thoughts to engross him again.

"Your Lady of the Phone!" How much more pretty than his was her own adopted pseudonym, he thought, and made a mental note to think of her so in future. After all, it was decent of her to have sent him warning, though it was beyond him to guess why she should have done so, as it was almost as incredible that she should have known where he had been hiding. What mystery surrounded her? Why did she betray him one day and save him the next? Did she realize that he was a suspected murderer?

These and other questions of a similar nature intrigued him, and rather to his annoyance he could not banish her from his thoughts. He felt he would like to thank her: it would appear ungrateful to ignore her friendly warning, and, probably because the wish was father to the thought, he suddenly remembered that it was in his power to do so. All he need do was to ring up Park 00343!

Should he, should he not? Mentally he juggled with the suggestion, one moment caution gaining the upper hand, the next inclination, and in the end it was desire which won the unequal contest, as desire usually does.

The nearest public telephone which he cared to use was well over a mile away, for in his present district people who telephoned were treated with suspicion, so he made his way toward it; while his head counselled wisdom and derided his folly, his heart waxed more gay than it had since the night of the murder.

Within twenty minutes he came in sight of the booth, and cursed to himself when he saw it was occupied. He had no wish to hang about in view of the public even where he was now, but he noticed just by its side

a public-house: George and the Crown, it heralded itself to the thirsty wayfarers.

There, at any rate, he could waste time, so he entered and ordered a Bass, and took it to one of the unstable chairs which skirted the wall from where he could see through the doorway to the glass-encased booth.

Too engrossed himself, he paid no attention to the idle conversation of the other men in the bar until, all at once, he caught the name of Blackshirt, and curiosity compelled him to listen.

"No, they ain't found him yet, and I don't suppose they will in a 'urry. He's too fly for the damned 'tecs."

"Wonder why 'e knocked the poor blighter on the 'ead for. Speaking for meself, I don't fink it worth while swinging for a few sparklers. Did yer see his letter to the *Evening Star* some time back? He says 'e ain't done it."

"Bah! Don't you believe that fairy-tale. Course 'e done it; 'oo else d'yer think did? Didn't the poor little kid see 'im wif 'er own eyes? What more d'yer want than that?"

Verrell closed his eyes that the speaker should not see the anger which blazed in them. That was just what hurt him so; to be proclaimed guilty on bare suspicion, without having been given a chance to speak in his own defence! The injustice of it that the good he had done should be construed as evil! Was there no one in the world who gave him credit for being innocent? With a sinking heart he realized that in all probability there was not one. Nellie Jones, for instance, though she had relied upon his word and let him free, he could not doubt that in her heart she believed him a murderer. Hepplewhaite probably did too, though he remained quiet, and was evidently willing to profit on Blackshirt's conditions.

All at once he wondered whether the game was

worth the candle. Why should he worry to prove his innocence? If the country chose to call him murderer, let it continue to think so! There would be still a good chance to escape to another land: Canada perhaps, with its broad, open spaces; Australia with its thousands of miles still to be explored; or patriotic New Zealand? There he could start life anew, there, in one of those countries, he could move freely and easily without hearing himself judged "murderer" wherever he went. He felt he was paying a heavy price for the notoriety he had claimed.

The suggestion developed more and more as he sat there waiting for the booth to empty. His mood grew darker, his thoughts blacker, obeying the dictates of his flooding pessimism. He began to regret the impulse to ring up the Lady of the Phone, as he believed he could almost hear, in advance, the accusation in her voice, the unspoken contempt, and so, with such thoughts displacing the more pleasant communing of the previous minutes, he saw that the telephone-box was free.

He continued to sit, debating in his mind whether to carry out his original intentions, but in the end pure obstinacy gained the day: with a surly air he drained his beer and slouched away.

A rapid glance to each side assured him that nobody was paying attention to him, so he casually entered the booth, lifted the receiver, and asked for the number which was curiously engraved in his memory. Almost at once he heard a voice answer, a voice which he knew well.

"Thomson speaking," he said.

"Oh!" There was a wealth of gladness in her tone, obviously apparent even in the one simple exclamation. If he had any doubts otherwise they were dispelled by her next few words. "You poor, poor man! My heart bleeds for you!"

He was gripped in a maze of conflicting emotions. While caution whispered and warned him of her, reminding him that she had twice betrayed him, he listened to her words, experiencing an incredulous joy almost beyond belief.

How should he reply—thank her for her warning—request her meaning—berate her for her second betrayal? Those questions were prompted by his brain! His heart, unheeding, answered for itself.

"You cannot mean that? You know I am a—a——" His lips would not frame the word. "Have you not read the newspapers, do you not know what they say of me? How can you feel sorry for me?"

"Because I know it is blurb which they write."

Hearing these few words his heart threw off its heavy load of misery—though not quite was he entirely satisfied.

"Supposing they tell the truth?"

"But they don't, do they?" she replied confidentially.

His voice cracked slightly when he answered. "Yet they do. It was I who carried the child into the house next door."

"Oh!" Once again her little sigh, pregnant with emotion. He distinguished dismay, a sudden, overwhelming doubt, and unaccountably his heart sank again into the mire of despond. It was for the merest fraction of a minute, for then there came to his ears, clearly and distinctly, the sweetest words to which he had ever listened. "Yes, that would be you. Who else but you? The poor, wee mite! But for the rest, not until I hear from your own lips will I believe that vile thing of you. No——" she said quickly as he spoke, "not even do I need to hear you say it."

A lump forced itself into his throat. "You—you have so much faith in me?" he whispered hoarsely. "Why?"

"Because you are capable of wonderful things, because you are not of the world you think, but far above it, because I—I admire you." Just in time she changed the verb, but her tone betrayed another word, and Blackshirt felt his heart lift with a wild leap.

"You think all—that?"

"And some!" She suddenly realized that she was forgetting her rôle, so she hastened to tinge her voice with the American accent again.

His thoughts whirled chaotically. What wonder was this, what beacon of faith was it which shone from out of an overcast, shrouded sky? Though all the world judged him guilty, yet there was one who, without a word of explanation, believed him innocent.

It was as if an unknown land were slowly unfolding itself before his eyes; he saw before him a vista of glory, undimmed and radiant; his heart beat quickly with an infectious gaiety; then—he remembered.

"Yet you attempted to betray me for a second time!"

The pain in his voice might, under different circumstances, have drawn the tears to her eyes, but for the moment she was too startled by his words.

"Why, what do you mean? I don't understand! Oh, Heavens! Do not tell me, after my faith in you, that you suspect me again!"

Her piteous cry hurt him. What could he say, what could he think? He told her all, and when he had finished she sighed.

"No wonder! Yet, you must believe me when I say that I never penned that letter. It must have been Hepplewhaite! He must have connected us up——" She stopped dead. God! how terrible if he had! Danger on every side! Where would it end? The tears flowed from her eyes and into her voice. She remembered Marshall's fear at the Manor House that night; realized how it had justified itself.

"Oh, man! Oh, man! Why not give up this mad game of yours? Sooner or later you will be caught and the disgrace will break your heart and perhaps—that of someone else as well. Supposing one day you fall in love! Will you be able to go to your loved one with a clear conscience, with a happy heart, to offer her the shelter of your name? No! No! a thousand times no! The past will haunt you; fear that ill might one day overtake you will gnaw at your heart, eat away your happiness! Give it up, and perhaps—one day—when you love—you will remember my words — and — will thank me. Find the real murderer—and then——"

And then—— His whirling thoughts plagued him, he wanted to think over what she had said, to digest and sum up her advice. After all, would it not be rather wonderful to be—loved! He must think—think! But firstly, there was work to be done! As she said, he must find the murderer. Afterward——

"Perhaps you are right, perhaps my heart warns me how true are your words! Later I will think them over, oh, Lady of the Phone! But now, tell me: how did you know I was at Ma Harrigan's?"

"No! No!" she cried in an agonized voice, "you must not question me, please! That is my secret, and mine alone. Rest content that it served you—and —God keep you safe, oh, man! and bring you success!"

That was all he heard! That, and the click as she disconnected.

Heedless of the people who brushed by him, oblivious of the noise and bustle of the traffic, engrossed only in his own deep thoughts, he continued on his way.

What happiness was this, which so suddenly assailed his heart, his soul, his being? Was it her faith that was the cause of it, or her words? Whatever it was she was right, right from first to last. If he should

ever love it must be as an honest man, as Richard Verrell, not as Blackshirt the cracksman!

What was love—his brain revolved in ever-widening circles—something whispered of love, of tenderness—he was looking into the eyes of love, tasting the lips of love, holding love in his arms——

All at once a tune forced itself to his lips. How happy he was, how bright the world, the world which had seemed so dark but a few minutes ago!

First find the murderer—were they not her words—and then——

TIME passed by and the murder at Clapham Junction ceased to flame in the pages of the Yellow Press for want of fuel. Day after day there were no further developments to report, until the editors tired of it and the public gradually forgot it in the miscellany of so many other interesting events.

In two places, however, it was neither overlooked nor shelved: Scotland Yard and the Underworld. The detectives continued their untiring efforts to comb the country for traces of Blackshirt, while the people of the underworld discussed every movement as a choice morsel of argument, for in a sense their sympathies were divided. Rejoicing that their bitter enemies were suffering reverse after reverse, yet they would have been equally pleased to hear of Blackshirt's arrest, for they had their own especial grudge against the gentleman cracksman.

In the meantime Blackshirt himself worked unceasingly, seeking in every direction for the missing ornament. From somewhere or other Uncle Isaac had secured several pieces of antique jewellery which Blackshirt had, perforce, to buy, but the pendant was not among them, so he went from fence to fence, always buying but never succeeding in his search.

Nor was he successful in hearing, as he had hoped, rumours to the effect that some criminal other than Blackshirt was responsible for the crime. Everybody took it for granted that he was guilty, and it became evident that the real assassin was lying low, secure in retreat, as were his accomplices.

Looking at the crime in a sane and sober light, he

came to realize that there may have been some vehicle involved—possibly a motor-car; so, acting on that assumption, he kept his ears well open for hints of criminals who used automobiles on their jobs. There were a few who did, and with painstaking care he delved into the history of each one, but in the end only to find that he was on the wrong track, for time and time again he came up against a perfect alibi, so that further investigations became unnecessary.

As he had hoped, he found a temporary home with China Joe—a popular name around the East End—but of all the ruffians, black, yellow, or white, who ever skulked in a human rat-hole, China Joe was the worst. Beside the shelter which his own dwelling-house gave to some of the worst criminals in London, Blackshirt had a shrewd idea that elsewhere he maintained an opium-den. As if this were not enough, he was often in touch with mysterious men and women who arrived and disappeared with such a suspicious secretiveness that Verrell suspected a traffic in "snow," better known as cocaine.

For some time Blackshirt hesitated before entering China Joe's abode of peace. Once settled there, he knew he would be able to come and go unquestioned, unsuspected, but he feared that the police might at any time make a chance raid upon the place, and thus, by what might easily be a cruel coincidence, he would be dragged into the police net, and discovery would prove inevitable. Eventually he chanced that small risk, so, in less than twelve hours after leaving Jane Harrigan's, Blackshirt was established in China Joe's, a house cleaned spotlessly each morning by the Chinaman, but as quickly dirtied by the white boarders.

Once again established in the Underworld, Verrell wondered how he had been content to live in it for so many years of his life, for now he hated every minute of his sojourn; the surroundings disgusted him all the

more by contrast to the West, of which he had become a part, and though he felt an infinite pity for the poor, unfortunate people, doomed to live their lives in the smoky, polluted atmosphere of the East, he realized at the same time that more often than not the fault lay with the people themselves.

He saw with his own eyes the efforts made by tender-hearted slum-workers to alleviate the hard lot of the people, the unceasing struggle of the local ministers to inculcate a sense of cleanliness, mental and physical, the care of Government servants to raise the level of the living; but he saw also the people laugh and smirk at the workers, sneer at the ministers, and metaphorically thumb their noses at the officials.

Like swine they were content to wallow in muck and filth, resenting interference. Of what use baths other than as a handy receptacle for the lumber of the house? Of what good dustbins when it was so much easier to throw the refuse out of the window?

Whenever he could he escaped from his surroundings and telephoned his Lady of the Phone. In those days she became the one ray of light in an otherwise impenetrably black background. Sparkling, emitting a pure, silver radiance, far as the sky above his reach, she represented his star of hope; the twinkle—her voice, so full of music and the charm of youth; the radiance—her faith in him, and the ideals which she was endeavouring and slowly succeeding in imbuing into him. He was of the earth, glooming about in the environs of a great city; she was of the glorious heavens, to be thought of only as an angel stretching out a hand of friendship.

Always when his thoughts were dark and his spirits low he would ring her up, and she would talk to him in a queer mixture of Yankee slang and cultured English, so that he would fall beneath the magic of her words, of her inspiration, and, like a giant refreshed, would

throw himself once more into the fray, prepared to dig and delve till he discovered the proof he needed.

One day he rang her up, and even through the phone Bobbie heard the despair which betrayed itself every now and then in his voice.

"You are tired; you have had no luck again?" she queried softly.

"It is all a closed book to me," he replied bitterly. "I throw out feelers here, there, and everywhere, I browse and search and burrow till it seems to me that London must be the very heart of crime, solved and unsolved, but all to no purpose. Somewhere is the man whose conscience is blackened by the terrible crime, but in his fear and cowardice he remains hidden and secure."

"Poor, poor Blackshirt——"

With an unbelievable rapidity he shouted into the phone to cover the last word. "My Lady! My Lady!" he pleaded, "for Heaven's sake do not call me by that name! A lazy telephonist at the exchange, a chance connection, and it will be discovered who rings you up so often, and you will be embroiled into what could only mean hideous scandal for you."

"I should not care for myself," she said defiantly, "but for you I tremble. You must, must forgive me! If I should be the means of betraying you, I think I—I should—kill myself."

"God forbid!" he said tensely. "Beside, why should you? What can I mean to you, my Lady, I who am nothing but an unworthy, irresponsible—— Caution restrains me from using the word, yet you must know full well what I mean."

"Perhaps I do, and yet I contradict you. You are not—*not*—what you say, for I know, fully as well as I know my own name, that you *are* worthy. Do not your books reveal your more noble thoughts and instincts? Does not their cleanliness endear them to the heart of the public?

"But my books are of crime, of criminals, of villains, detectives, and similar characters."

"Yes, yes; do I not know, I who have read every one of them? But even the worst of your characters is morally clean, as compared to many a hero of the present-day novel. I can forgive—and so can most women at the bottom of their hearts—men who are self-admitted criminals, but never the men who dig themselves into the hidden lives of people, rotting their bodies and souls. What of the man who robs a girl of her honour and afterwards spurns her aside to make way for her successor? What of the blackmailer who settles like a leech and sucks all that life holds dear from his victims—money, courage, and faith?"

"Your views of this world and its people are of the idealist, and yet they instil into me dreams that open out as something wondrous——"

"And isn't life wondrous?" she interrupted quickly.

He sighed. "To some, perhaps; but when I think of those few I wonder if things are ever really equalized. Where for each one to whom existence is a fairyland of content there must be hundreds, even thousands, for whom life is just so many years of slavery, so many decades of misery, a lifetime of fighting for the very wherewithal to live. In these parts I see the rawest side of life in all its drabness, its distress and tribulation, and my heart bleeds for the people who have to suffer it. Perhaps they do not seize every advantage they might of dragging themselves out of the morass, but I can understand. Such squalor saps even the determination to better oneself."

"I think you must be wrong," she said. "Happiness is ours for the asking, whether we be prince or peasant. You cannot count happiness in terms of money, any more than is the labourer with ideals poorer than the money-grabbing broker in the Stock Exchange who rides in his Rolls-Royce. Happiness is everywhere

and comes to everyone, for, as all things, it is directed by the law of average, and the law of average is inexorable."

"The law of average is inexorable! But they are my very words! I have used them before to someone—to someone—I cannot understand. Somehow those words conjure up a vision of the sea, of a crowded boat, of a harbour."

Bobbie's heart leapt; a surge of joy seemed to sweep through her till she could scarcely speak. Unless she were at fault, Verrell, in those words, had revealed the first signs of an awakening memory. Suppose—just suppose—she could help to conjure it back in its entirety—carefully chosen words—a sentence here and there to strike the right chord——

"Think, think hard," she urged quickly, "think of that journey. Is there a woman by your side? Is there a train waiting to take you and her to a far city? Think hard!"

Poor Bobbie! It is a moot point whether Verrell's mind would have recaptured more than just the flashing gleam of remembrance, but in any event her sudden questions surprised and upset his train of thoughts.

"Why do you ask these questions?" he asked curiously.

"Do not speak, but think—think!" she commanded.

"But I do not understand! Besides, it was just a picture which sprang into my mind's eye. Do not all of us at some time or other in our lives experience a queer notion that an action on our parts, a vivid scene, a sentence, is a dim memory of the past, and upon this build up a theory of reincarnation?"

"Oh, you try my patience!" she uttered angrily. "Can you not see that the memory of the boat and the harbour may represent a scene, an act, of that dark blank in your mind of not long ago? Might it not

be connected with McTavish, of whom you can remember nothing?"

"How do you know of that blank in my memory?" Surprise was in his voice. "I have told that to no one." Then he added, more slowly: "Except Roberts."

At that moment Bobbie wished that he were there by her side instead of being miles away, connected only by a thin line of wire. She believed that if she could have taken his hands into hers then and gazed into his eyes, she might have persuaded him to concentrate upon the past, to force his mind to travel backward to that borderland of unconsciousness, to pierce the veil of darkness, for she experienced an intuition that the moment was a psychological one.

"Listen to me carefully. Roberts is your friend. Need I say that I am that also—and more," she whispered softly; so much so that he was not certain whether those were indeed her last two words. "Now we—Roberts and I—are allies to help you in your search, for we believe in your innocence and have faith in you. As your friend, as my ally, Roberts has told me of that night when you revealed the fact of the blank in your mind. That is how I know. Now can't you understand that perhaps your Lady of the Phone knows so much about you because she was your—comrade—some time during that period of which you remember nothing?"

"But surely my loss of memory covers only a week—two weeks."

"Have you tested yourself?" she asked.

"No, no. It has not occurred to me; I have not given it heed, thinking it meant little."

"Little!" Her voice cracked. "If you but knew! If I dared but tell you!"

"Please tell me," he pleaded. "I have not understood until now, but I should like to know more."

"I will speak to you of a few things, but the rest you must discover yourself. Urge your mind to-night to obey the dictates of your will; make it travel the way you want, and that—backward. During the time of which we are talking—that time during which you wrote 'The Vanished Heirloom'—something wonderful came into your life, which set you wondering, questioning whether your life was all it should be. So powerful was the effect of that intangible emotion that you began to change week by week, until you became all I have described to you just now. You became—oh, how can I tell you?—a man such as you would be glad to see marry your sister, your daughter. Does that convey to you the kind of man you became?"

"Something wonderful!" he repeated slowly. "And that——"

"That is what you must discover for yourself. Think back, and you will succeed. But now I must go. Good-bye, and God bless you!"

So hurriedly did she break off the connection that Verrell was caught unprepared. There was so much he wished to ask, to say. He felt a tiny stab of disappointment, not realizing that her emotion had overmastered her, and the tears had gathered in her eyes until they overflowed.

"Yer been a ruddy long time," grumbled the tobacconist from whose booth Verrell had telephoned. "Bin ringin' up yer best gal, I suppose."

Verrell grunted. "Curiosity killed the cat," he replied shortly, from which the tradesman assumed the answer to be in the affirmative, and grinned comprehendingly.

Verrell gained the street, his mind whirling chaotically. What he had told his Lady of the Phone was more than true. He had not given the matter of his temporary aberration serious attention, for, without thrashing the matter out, he had always taken it for

granted that the time represented by his loss of memory was of short duration, because his life before and afterward seemed so evenly bridged over.

He began now to realize the mistake he had made. Funny! He had dimly wondered why it was he did not remember more about the production of "The Vanished Heirloom," and it was a fact that with regard to the actual writing of it he could remember practically nothing.

He walked moodily homeward—if China Joe's could be described as "home"—his thoughts already travelling backward. He remembered returning from France, but not crossing the Channel in the first instance. Why had he gone there? Was it to escape the vengeance of McTavish? Then, having heard that the other man was dead, was that why he had returned?

It was annoying, humiliating, to lose himself thus in the backwaters of his memory, and he determined to do as his Lady had suggested. Think back! Again, there is no knowing what might have been the result of his efforts, for once more Fate stepped in, determined at all costs that Verrell should not pierce the veil which concealed the past.

Deeply engrossed in his thoughts, he lowered his glance to the ground, and quite unconsciously dropped his slouching gait and quickened his pace. There was the inevitable collision, and the next moment several pounds of potatoes and onions rolled out over the pavement.

"Gor blimey!" The woman surveyed the wreckage of her shopping. "You ain't in a 'urry, are yer?"

"Sorry, mum," he growled. "I'll give yer a 'and wiv 'em."

"Yer don't say so, now? Now ain't yer a little gentleman," she said sarcastically.

Verrell stooped to hide his grin. She was characteristic of the type which lived in the East End, grimly

facetious when the occasion arose, yet more than kind-hearted. Together they commenced to pick up the vegetables. Before many seconds had gone by they were joined by other willing helpers, and in less than a minute the shopping bag was once again replete.

"Thanks, me 'earties," she said to them all, turning on her way, and then Verrell recognized that for which he had been searching, for, fastened round her neck, looking sadly out of place, a gaudy, violet-coloured dress for a background, was the small antique pendant stolen from Ormond, the jeweller.

Verrell's soul filled with joy. Success in sight at last. He saw the woman walking away in the distance, and with a casual slouch commenced to follow her.

His task was easy, even when he could not catch a glimpse of the violet dress, there was always the hat to be seen—an equally colourful effort. The chase led from shop to shop, from the grocer to the fishmonger, and from thence to a tobacconist, the very fact of which caused Verrell to thrill with a sense of victory, for a woman visiting a tobacconist might mean that she was doing so on behalf of a man; and was it too great a stretch of the imagination to suggest that she did so because the man himself was afraid to venture out?

At length the woman turned away from the main road and penetrated deep in the heart of the slums, nearing China Joe's with every step; so much so that she passed it by and turned into another house twenty yards farther down the road, on the opposite side.

He lounged in the doorway of China Joe's furtively watching No. 16, his cap pulled well over his eyes, a cigarette drooping from the corner of his lips; but though he waited some time the woman did not come out again, and presently he saw smoke issuing from one of the chimneys. After a while he strolled past and smelled the pungent aroma of frying onions. There seemed no longer any doubt that she lived there. All

that he wanted to ascertain now was whether his quarry were there also.

He left the street and went indoors, up to his room. From behind its covered window he knew he would be safe from outside observation, and yet at the same time would be able to see all that occurred. There he waited, not daring to make inquiries for fear of drawing suspicion upon himself, but hoping against hope that something might happen which would give him the rest of the information he required.

For two days nothing occurred. There were plenty of people living in the same house; from what he had been able to gather, it seemed as though the place were divided up between three distinct families, all of whom were more than prolific, for he counted on separate occasions at least fourteen children coming from No. 16. Yet never did he see a man with the woman he had followed. Always she left and returned by herself.

Once he saw her outlined in a window on the upper floor, from which he assumed that she lived there, for he had discovered that a bricklayer occupied the ground floor, a Billingsgate fish-porter the basement. The circle was narrowing!

On the third day, just as dusk was descending, the circle closed in. There was a crash of breaking glass, and Verrell saw a window on the top floor of No. 16 shattering to pieces. The next moment it was being inspected by a man, and Verrell knew without further doubt that he had discovered his quarry.

In the red glow of the dying sun he saw the brutal cast in which the face was set, the overhanging eyebrows, the scrubby chin, the big nose, and it seemed to him that the features were dimly reminiscent; but that fact did not worry Verrell. His blood raced through its arteries, his heart beat and pounded in his chest, his eyes clouded with a misty film. Assuredly he beheld the murderer. The scowling bestiality, the

nervous glance into the street, the hurried drawing back into the shadow, all told their own tale.

It was a triumphant Blackshirt who ventured into the dusk a few minutes afterward. There was work to be done, his bag to be collected from Fenchurch Street Station left luggage counter, a telegram to be sent to Hepplewhaite, and—for the first time in his life—a revolver to be purchased.

For this he went to Isaac Slavinsky. Slavinsky, who would sell his soul providing the price were right, delved into his stock and brought forth a dusty Colt, taking care that all his blinds were tightly drawn before he handed it over.

"And a leetle ammunition, no?" he asked.

Verrell nodded abruptly, and Uncle Isaac smiled craftily as he produced a box of cartridges. "Here you are, meester. A leetle revolver practice is goot for the soul, eh! Pe careful. Many a man has bought a rope vit his gun."

The left luggage clerk was an amiable chap. He patted the bag with a grin. "Here you are, mate, all nice and clean for you. Goin' away for a week's holiday?"

Verrell looked surprised. "Just wot I am goin' ter do!" he admitted. The clerk chuckled, and never knew that he was handing over a valise which contained the stock-in-trade of the much-wanted Blackshirt.

Nor was he any more suspicious than the post office clerk, who indifferently demanded a shilling for the telegram to Hepplewhaite, which read:

Scoop to-night two o'clock 16 River Lane.

Everything now prepared, Verrell retired to China Joe's to await zero hour.

* * * * *

At a quarter to two a.m. a black shadow, seizing a

favourable opportunity, darted across the road from China Joe's to the doorway of No. 16.

Never, perhaps, in all his career, had Blackshirt commenced a more hazardous expedition. In the first case the doors of the houses were flush to the pavement, so that until he was successful in forcing the door and entering inside he would be in full view of anyone entering River Lane from either end, or from a chance inhabitant who might happen to look out a neighbouring window.

Moreover, even when he was once indoors there were inside, to his certain knowledge, at least six adults and fourteen children, any one of whom might awake, raise the alarm, and he would find himself in a veritable wasp's nest.

Lastly, he was once again in his Blackshirt clothes, and apart from the police it would have been difficult to have found a more hated man in the underworld of London than Blackshirt. If he were discovered——

Fortunately only a simple lock was the one protection for the front door of No. 16, and the second key which Blackshirt fitted sufficed to turn the tumblers; the door swung open, and he slipped inside.

Wondering why the usual top and bottom bolts and middle chain had not been used, he felt for them with his sensitive fingers, but what he found, or rather failed to find, caused a faint smile of amusement to tremble on his lips. Evidently the bolts had been in their rightful place once upon a time, but Blackshirt could feel only the holes left by the screws, and could not doubt that they had gone to the nearest pawnbroker.

Unlike the jeweller's house, which was the last one he had entered, No. 16 was, in the quietness of the night, almost a pandemonium of noise. In the room to his right someone was snoring heavily. Farther on there was a coughing, accompanied by a sleepy voice which shouted to the offender to "stow that row."

Down in the basement a baby was crying lustily, and, to complete the chorus, from somewhere out at the back two warring cats cried their defiance into the heavens.

It seemed foolish to continue his progress, but he was too desperate to take heed of the voice of caution, arguing to himself that in a house in which twenty people managed to sleep an unexpected sound or two would raise very little alarm.

Only upstairs did it seem silent, and as he carefully mounted the bare, boarded stairs he kept his attention fixed above him. As he set foot on the sixth step he saw, on a level with his eyes, a gleam of light escaping from under the door.

He halted, startled. It had not entered into his calculation that the man and wife might be awake, and, as he became conscious that there was a low murmur of voices from the back room, he cursed heartily under his breath, realizing that his expedition was likely to turn out a failure, for that night, anyway.

So after all he must retire unsuccessful. He hated the very thought; it was too much like a strategic retreat; and yet he could not see what else there was to do, for now it would seem impossible to carry through his original plan—namely, to search the room occupied by the suspected murderer in the hope of finding the stolen jewellery, for Blackshirt had an idea that the fences had not yet handled it.

He turned to go back. Even as he did so his chagrin flared up anew at taking such a step. Intuition prompted him to go forward to the door and listen to the staccato conversation being carried on behind it; so, gladly welcoming an excuse, he advanced to the top of the stairs, to see the door outlined by a thin thread of light.

Two steps forward, and he found he could hear.

"Gor' blimey, wot d'yer tike me for? I can't keep

on buying and buying without some dough. Come across, Sniffy, and not so much of yer lip."

"Blast yer, Liz! I tell yer I ain't got a stiver. You 'ad me larst bob Friday."

"Then go out to-morrow and git rid of some of them sparklers. The coast ort to be clear by now. Uncle Isaac 'ull get rid of 'em for yer. Trust 'im, the dirty dog."

"Stow yer gab, for Gawd's sake, Liz." There was a note of fear in the man's voice. "I tells yer it ain't safe. They'll nab me as sure as me name's Tompkins."

"Oh, streuth! You fair makes me sick, you do, Sniffy, you big, hulkin' great coward. Wot yer want to go and do 'im in for, if yer so afraid of yerself?"

"I didn't mean to, honest to Gawd, Liz, I didn't, but the ruddy fool came down those stairs jist when we was startin' on the job, Alf and me, and I was so mad I dotted 'im one on the bean. 'Ow'd I know a few taps would out 'im like that?" The man's voice broke into a whine.

"Shut up, yer poor boob. If yer won't go out and git rid of them sparklers, give 'em to me; I will. I'll go round to old Isaac ter-morrow and make 'im cough up. What d'yer reckon we ought to git, Sniffy?"

"Twenty or thirty quid! But will yer really, Liz?"

"Course I will."

"Right yer are." There was a distinct note of relief in the man's voice. "Let's 'ave 'em up and squiz at 'em."

Blackshirt heard the man spring from his bed, and stood ready to dive into the shadows of another room, but evidently Sniffy trusted the jewels only under his own nose, for presently he said: "There yer are, Liz. Pretty little lot, ain't they?"

"Where's the rest of 'em?" Liz asked suspiciously.

"Where d'yer think? Split up between the four of us, of course. 'Sides, these ain't a bad lot, neither."

"Bah! I should want more than that after outing the poor blighter."

"Garn, shut up fer love of Christ! Don't keep blubbin' on about 'im. 'E's a corpse now. Why don't yer 'ave one of these 'ere shiny ones to wear instead of that old dangly thing wot I showed yer?"

"Not me, thanks. I'd rather 'ave the dibs. I only wore the other 'cause it ain't worf nothin'. Bet it came out of a Christmas cracker. Yus, old Ormond's a deader all right, but I don't know wot yer worryin' yer guts out about. 'Aven't I told yer, the darbies is after that there Blackshirt?"

"Blackshirt! Blast 'im! I 'opes they cops the ruddy blighter and 'angs 'im."

"Gawd streuth, so do I! Why don't yer send one of them there nonymon letters to Scotland Yard tellin' 'em who that ruddy Blackshirt is and where 'e lives? Wot was 'is blinkin' nime?"

"Richard Verrell! You bet I found out all abart 'im after that night I copped 'im in bed all over with bandages."

Blackshirt bit his lip to prevent a cry of exclamation escaping him. Good God! was there no end to the list of people who knew him? He could almost have sobbed in pure vexation. To what was the man inside referring? How could Sniffy, as he was called, have met him? If only his cursed memory would wake up, reveal the secrets of that blank space.

He thought he heard a sound below, and turned with a jerk. He brushed against the door. It swung open, and he stood revealed in the light of the flickering oil-lamp which stood on the mantelpiece.

The tableau was set—Sniffy and his wife in bed, Blackshirt's back framed in the doorway.

"Blackshirt!" Sniffy hurled the word into the air with a furious yell, his hand delved beneath his pillow. His arm jerked up; simultaneously with the levelling

of Blackshirt's revolver, as he swung round again, there was the crack of an explosion.

Blackshirt felt a vivid tearing pain searing his scalp, his twitching fingers jerked unconsciously, and the silence was rent with a second louder and more terrifying detonation, which echoed and re-echoed through the tiny room, and through the haze of smoke Blackshirt saw Sniffy slowly slip backward on the pillow, just above his heart a tiny red blotch staining the questionable whiteness of his nightshirt.

Verrell swayed on his heels, bemused by the pain in his head and the horror of what he had done; through a ghastly film which would not disperse he gazed entranced at the scene before him, while the blood trickled from the wound and blinded one eye. Sniffy, so horribly still, his eyes staring, accusing, his lower jaw hanging—and Lizzie—just as still and motionless, her eyes shut, her face strangely peaceful. Doubtless she had fainted, but he could pay no further heed to her, for there was a swelling crescendo of noise from below as the people of the house awakened precipitately from their sleep, sprang from their beds, and intermingled in the tiny hallway below.

Blackshirt endeavoured to stir his brain into activity —a few seconds more, and the upper part of the building would be invaded—but his mind worked sluggishly. He wished to lie down, wanted rest, peace, and quietness. He remained where he was, weakening every second from loss of blood, while the bricklayer and the fish-porter headed the massed advance up the stairs.

* * * * *

Hepplewhaite, having left his taxi waiting in a convenient and less conspicuous spot, was approaching River Lane when the quiet night was disturbed by the reverberating echo of two explosions. He halted in his stride, for the noise was almost paralyzing in its suddenness, but the next moment his eyes flared joyously.

Copy! Drama, tragedy, perhaps mystery, just round the corner, and he on the spot! He broke into a run, in his excitement all thoughts of Blackshirt temporarily displaced.

He panted down the road; not for some time had he moved so quickly. Then, just before he reached the corner a limousine flashed round, its flaring, blinding headlights like two fiery eyes of a ghostly chariot from another world. Then it passed him, leaving behind the echo of a woman's sob, a cry which pierced to the reporter's heart, its piteousness hurting.

His mind jumped instantly to one conclusion—a woman had been kidnapped! What damnable underhand business had just taken place? His jaw set firmly, then he cursed himself for an idiot not to have taken note of the car's registration number. He broke into a run again. Reporter or no reporter, he was also a man, and could put in a man's punch if necessary.

Once round the corner he saw, a little distance down the road, a group already gathering—men and women clad in the lightest attire. They were crowded round a doorway, gazing affrightedly upward. Down the street other windows were springing into light or being thrown up; in the distance a police whistle was blowing frantically.

Hepplewhaite reached the group of sightseers. There was no need for him to ask questions; previous newcomers had done so, and were being answered.

"What's wrong, mate?"

"Bloke and his wife bin murdered or somethin' like that, so Alf says."

The journalist gazed at the house in question. Murder! Gad, what a scoop! He pushed his way to the front with difficulty; then, with a start, saw the number of the house. No. 16! The place of his assignation with Blackshirt!

A bunch of men conversing in low tones blocked the doorway, but he pushed his way through, and, because they were in the presence of death, no one swore at him.

"Who is it?" he heard someone ask in a whisper.

"Sniffy and 'is Lizzie."

"Gawd! Poor old Sniffy!"

Inside were many more people—men, women, and whimpering children—so many were there already crowded into the limited space that he could not move, and though he alternately pleaded and pushed he scarcely made any progress.

Without warning there was a yell of rage from above, then a sudden hush, dramatic in contrast to the low, repressed chatter of a moment before. For a fraction of a second so still was it that Hepplewhaite heard once again the faint, shrill call of the police whistle in the distance, and in that space of time the dull echo of a hoarse cry floated down the stairs.

"Blackshirt!"

"Blackshirt!" the name was repeated, first wonderingly then hurled angrily into the air. "Blackshirt!" In every direction the hated name was passed on from mouth to mouth, repeated with venom, spite, and fury. Blackshirt the gentleman crook, the betrayer of Sniffy Tompkins, enemy of second-grade burglars and crooks! Blackshirt!

Hepplewhaite was the first to realize the truth. Blackshirt up above! Almost as soon as the journalist guessed the truth so did the neighbours; there was a simultaneous movement toward the stairs.

Blackshirt up above! Their chance for revenge, the time for which they had long been waiting. Like a pack of wolves scenting their prey they moved forward, jostling and struggling to reach the narrow staircase that they might wreak their vengeance on the unknown cracksman.

They forgot that others were already there! Even

above the noise coming from below arose the din of a struggle upstairs, and Hepplewhaite felt a constriction around his heart at the thought of Verrell in the hands of these men, many of them cruel and relentless when thoughts of revenge were uppermost in their minds, others, criminals themselves, anxious to lay their hands upon the man responsible for landing Sniffy Tompkins into "jug"; for murdering him. A tooth for a tooth: an eye for an eye!

Even to Blackshirt's confused and bewildered mind there penetrated a suggestion of fear. In the gleam of a candle which someone had lit he noticed the faces of the bricklayer and the fish-porter convulsed with rage, noticed their knotted fists doubled up, saw them advance fiercely toward him, every movement prophesying their intentions should he fall into their hands. Perhaps actual murder was far from their minds, but Blackshirt knew the class, appreciated their lack of control when once they were gripped in a tempestuous fury.

He glanced helplessly around, but so far as he could see he was trapped. Behind him a wall, on one side of him a door, on the other the banisters; in front of him a mob of cursing men.

If only he felt less weak! Nevertheless, his hands gripped convulsively, and for the first time he realized that he still held the revolver in his hand. A leering face approached him, a hairy fist commenced to swish upward toward his chin. Feebly he stepped aside so that the blow missed, then before the man had time to recover he reversed the revolver, gripped it by the barrel and brought the butt down upon the man's head.

Blackshirt's counter-attack was more than successful. The fish-porter was heavily built, the blow bowled him on to the top of the banisters. There was a tearing crash as the woodwork gave way, and the man fell on

to the heads of those who were rushing up to help in the fracas.

There was a confused yelling and scuffling; sounds which made Hepplewhaite fear for Blackshirt; yet in the confusion Blackshirt managed to open the door by his side. He reeled in, gasping for breath, feeling sick and weak. Somehow or other he managed to turn the key, then collapsed, unconscious, and so failed to hear the battering of the men's fists upon the barrier which he had set up against them, or the heavy clatter in the street as the police arrived to his rescue—and arrest.

* * * * *

With Hepplewhaite hanging on their rear the police forced a way upstairs till the house was cleared, and the journalist was enabled to gaze into the room of death where Sniffy and Lizzie lay suspiciously still. Scattered grotesquely over the bed-clothes was a glittering heap of jewels, which seemed to scintillate wickedly against the bloody background.

The sight was unnerving, and Hepplewhaite wrenched his eyes away from the grizzly, but fascinating, spectacle. His brain raced chaotically in an endeavour to get a hang of the situation. This was the house where Blackshirt had warned him he would find the murderer of Ormond, but if so who was the murderer? Where was Blackshirt? What was the meaning of the motor-car, utterly incongruous in such a street as River Lane; what meant the sob he had heard?

Despite himself his gaze wandered back to the bed, and it was the sight of the jewellery which solved part of the puzzle. Sniffy was the murderer; the jewellery the stock he had stolen.

Before he had time to give further thought to the mystery, a policeman approached him, suspicion in his eyes.

"Hello!" he said shortly, "what are you doing here? You are not of these parts."

"All right, constable," he replied. "I am Hepplewhaite of the *London Globe*. I was round the corner when I heard the sound of two explosions so I raced here at once."

The policeman eyed him thoughtfully. "Well, perhaps you'd better stop here with us. You understand, we shall have to make inquiries."

"Go ahead, constable. You'll find what I say is in order. Moreover, I may be able to help you."

"Help me! How?" the man grunted.

"Because I have an idea that man was the murderer of Ormond, the jeweller, of Clapham Junction."

"Him — Blackshirt!" The constable was incredulous.

"No. That's not Blackshirt. Don't you know Blackshirt denied the murder?"

The policeman looked at him keenly. Just then there was a movement from the bed; a second constable called out in a hushed whisper:

"The woman is still alive!"

They quickly crossed to the bed. To Hepplewhaite it looked as though she were already dead until, as they watched the woman's eyes flickered open, and her lips moved.

"Blackshirt——" she gasped, then a fit of coughing seized her and blood rushed from her mouth. The constable started.

"Yes, yes," he said eagerly.

Presently she spoke again in halting, gasping words. "Not—Blackshirt fault—Sniffy fired first—Blackshirt not guilty of—of murder of Ormond—was Sniffy and 'Enery Blake and Cracker Joe—Blackshirt is—is—he lives—at——" Something rattled in her throat, her lower jaw dropped, and Lizzie Tompkins was no more.

It did not take the keen policeman, who seemed to have all the makings of a detective in him, ten minutes to reconstruct the drama; the exchange of shots, Blackshirt's one, Sniffy's two; Sniffy's second diverted by the spasm caused by the entry of Blackshirt's bullet in his heart, piercing the breast of Lizzie.

In the meantime the constable asked aloud the same question which Hepplewhaite had already put to himself. Where was Blackshirt? A few questions to the excited neighbours outside the locked door—the story unfolded itself. Two of the policemen broke open the door, then carried the limp body of Blackshirt into the back room again, where they laid him carefully on the floor.

Almost immediately afterward a divisional detective and a police-surgeon appeared. The latter did no more than glance at Sniffy and Lizzie. "Too late!" he grunted; then turned his attention upon Blackshirt. A rapid examination of the wound soon assured him that it was not fatal, so instructing one of the constables to fetch an ambulance, he applied a rough dressing to the injury, which was successful in stopping the flow of blood.

"Queer looking customer!" he said, glancing up at the detective.

The detective laughed shortly. "Don't you recognize him, doc?"

"How can I with this mask on?" the latter asked.

"That's the point. It's the mask which gives the game away."

The doctor's forehead creased in his bewilderment, but suddenly he realized the truth.

"By Gad! Blackshirt!"

The other man nodded his head. "That's him, doc!"

"H'm! So now the mystery of Blackshirt will not remain one for long."

"You're right, doc. No longer than it will take me to strip that mask off so that I can get a good look at his face. Once I see it I'll not forget it in a hurry."

He stretched out his hand, and with another movement would have pulled the concealing mask off, but the doctor caught his wrist.

"No, Williams, you can't do that."

"Why not, sir?"

"You might pull the skin off as well. The blood which flowed from the wound has stuck. That silk will want careful soaking before it can be taken away."

The detective was obviously disappointed, but he did not dispute the doctor's authority, instead he turned to Hepplewhaite.

"Well, sir, you are from the *London Globe*, are you? I'll bet this is the best scoop you have ever struck."

Hepplewhaite nodded his head, but did not reply otherwise, and the detective turned to his work, seeking for clues, carefully gathering together the stolen jewellery, measuring up distances, taking photographs, and minutely attending to every detail of the usual procedure.

So this was the end of Blackshirt! At last he was in the hands of the police. There could be no escape now! For some reason or other Hepplewhaite experienced a pang of regret. He had known Blackshirt as Verrell slightly and liked him; he admired him even as Blackshirt.

Unconsciously he shrugged his shoulders. Anyway, Blackshirt's race was run! A matter of minutes would see his identity betrayed to the police. Once it was known to Scotland Yard the newspapers would be informed, and it would be published to the world at large. Whereas he knew now. It was the chance of his lifetime.

With a muttered word to the detective he hurried downstairs, past the policemen on guard, and into the street where a curious crowd still hovered about. Even as he emerged two ambulances turned the corner and made their way through the people toward the house of tragedy.

Hepplewhaite did not stop to see the finish. Already his stomach felt squeamish at what he had seen, so he hurried back to where he had left the taxi, to find the driver cursing loudly and bending over the near-side rear wheel.

"Blasted puncture," he explained briefly, in answer to Hepplewhaite's inquiry.

Hepplewhaite chafed at the delay, but there was no help for it; to pass the time more quickly he gave the man a hand; within fifteen minutes or so the tyre was sound again. Just then one of the ambulances swished past on its way to the hospital.

Even though he were watching Hepplewhaite was never quite sure, in after days, what happened, it was over so quickly, the surroundings shadowy; but from a dark side-road a lurching lorry charged out, straight in front of the ambulance. There was a shrieking of brakes, a crash of grinding metal, the tinkling of broken glass, and the two vehicles interlocked and came to a standstill. Shadowed figures jumped from the lorry, there was a significant whisper of "Hands up." A glint of light was reflected on burnished metal, and Hepplewhaite saw two pairs of arms held in the air.

Then, quickly and silently, a darkened limousine swept out of the same side-road from which the lorry had emerged; and as it passed through the glare of the ambulance's one remaining headlight the journalist glimpsed a woman driving. The car came to a stop beside the lorry, the shadows moved quickly to and fro, then, before Hepplewhaite or the taxi-driver had quite

realized what was happening, the limousine disappeared into the darkness, her engine humming with speed.

"Well I'm——, may the—rot my——" said the taximan luridly, but Hepplewhaite laid his head against the taxi and laughed till the breath left his body, for he recognized the fact that though Blackshirt had been unable to rescue himself, there had been others to do it for him! Moreover, now he understood the reason for a woman's cry, floating out to him from another limousine—or the same one!

But now the story was finished; giant presses were already turning out one million copies of the *London Globe!* At all costs the edition must be held up, so that the *London Globe* could feature the biggest story in the history of the paper, moreover, publish it exclusively.

On his way to the office he reflected upon the tragedy of that night. He had trusted Blackshirt, and Blackshirt had repaid that trust. Both of them had played square, and both of them had received their reward; Hepplewhaite a scoop which would ensure him a good position in a far better paper than the *Evening Star*, and Blackshirt the knowledge that the world would learn of his innocence.

Hepplewhaite's obligation to Blackshirt was over, he had held his tongue until this moment, but now the necessity for it was past. It was in his power to follow up his first scoop by an even greater one, the unmasking of Blackshirt's identity. If he played his cards well he could make a tremendous thing of it, could spread the history of his patient piecing together of clues and theories to make it last a long time. His name would be hailed as the acutest journalist along Fleet Street.

Even if he did give the story to his paper it would probably be worth a respectable bonus, and afterward

serial rights in America, perhaps subsequent book publication in both countries. His dream continued, became even more roseate-hued. His name made he would be able to achieve his ambition and write fiction. He would gain greater and greater renown, there might be no limit to the heights he would reach—and yet——

He could not dispel the clinging echo of that sob; so palpably had it welled up from a breaking heart. After all, Blackshirt was married and was loved, even as he himself was married and loved, and if he climbed to success the way his dreams suggested he would climb up a ladder of tears, and the first step upon which he would remorselessly set foot would consist of a woman's happiness.

He groaned. He had thought, had vowed to himself, that he hated Blackshirt, but there was no hate in his heart now, only incredulous admiration for a man whom he knew to be a criminal, and yet was a white man—and once again Blackshirt's charm gained the day. As Roberts, as Bobbie, as Marshall, had one after the other been conquered, so now was Hepplewhaite, and the journalist heaved a sigh of relief as he himself realized the fact. Blackshirt's identity should still remain a secret so far as he was concerned.

* * * * *

Once again it seemed to Verrell that he was being pulled into abysmal depths; once again his body was being sucked into a thundering whirlpool, ever revolving, ever twisting. Sick, giddy, and spiritless there were times when he let go, drifted perilously near the fatal eddy, but each time someone clutched him in time and pulled him back to a safer anchorage, and with the same hand holding him he passed the crisis and the vortex faded, in its place was substituted sweet visions of a sunshiny fairyland.

Gradually consciousness returned, but with it came gloomy, ominous clouds which extinguished the brightness, Bobbie dead, his Bobbie, charred to a cindery corpse. O God! Why didn't they let him die?

His eyes flickered open, but as quickly shut again, for the strong light hurt, but afterward he was able to open them wide. There was someone beside him, sitting funnily, it seemed, for he was looking at a waist. His eyes travelled upward, and then——

"Bobbie!" He whispered the words; his body shook in an ecstasy of passionate joy. His lips murmured an unconscious prayer of gratitude, even though he believed he were dreaming.

And Bobbie—she gazed down at Verrell, into his welcoming eyes. It did not seem possible, she had not heard aright—he had called her Bobbie! With parted lips she searched his white face, but her eyes misted so that she had to clear them. Yet it was true, he was calling her again, calling her Bobbie! He had regained his memory!

With a glad cry she pushed the chair away from her, and sank upon her knees so that her head was on a level with his, and if Verrell had blazed into throbbing happiness, the sublime wave of overpowering bliss which swept over her body was almost painful in its savage intensity. Every limb shook like an aspen leaf, her lips trembled, the blood raced madly through her arteries, while her heart beat and pounded within her breast until she was breathless.

Her emotion was such that it bordered on hysteria, but by an effort of will she conquered herself, and smiled at him.

"My dear, my dear," she murmured, and covered his hand with hot kisses. Beyond that she could say no more; the words seemed to choke in her throat.

"I'm glad I am dead, too, Bobbie—this is a nice

heaven!" he murmured. Then his eyes closed again and he dozed into a gentle sleep.

When he next awoke he was fully sensible to his surroundings, and his heart was bitter. During his sleep the vision of Bobbie had haunted him; now he was waking up to reality. Then a door opened, he saw Bobbie as he had seen her in his dreams, and he groaned with mental anguish. He had thought he was awake, yet apparently he was still asleep.

The next moment the sound of her voice softly stole to his ears as she spoke to the doctor who entered with her. His heart leaped with a sudden, overwhelming wonderment. It could not be, it could not be! Bobbie was dead, burned to death, while he himself was just recovering. And yet—she was alive! It was not imagination, but stark, indisputable fact. She was alive! He sobbed slightly, and at the sound she turned and saw he was awake.

"At last!" she muttered softly, and crossed to his side. "At last! And yet at times I thought——" she broke off abruptly, but he knew what she meant.

"But you, Bobbie, they told me you were dead. That poor girl, burned to death? It was your ring——" His voice rose slightly.

"Hush!" she said softly, and laid her cool hand on his forehead. "It must have been the poor girl opposite us, darling of my heart. I was fingering the ring at the time of the accident; it must have jerked out of my hand. Perhaps she clutched it unconsciously in sheer terror—perhaps she hoped to save it for me—we shall never know the truth."

"Poor, poor girl!" he murmured. "And you—are safe." He looked up into her eyes. "So you are still mine, Bobbie darling, and when I am well again we will start once again on another honeymoon. Yet why am I in bed? Was I injured—and yet—ah! I remember, it was my head. I have been here long? We

must send a wreath to the relations of the unfortunate girl, a thanksgiving for your safety."

"But Richard dear, is it not too late?"

He looked at her amazed. "Have I been here so long?"

"A week now."

"Then why is it too late?"

Her forehead creased slightly, and unconsciously her hand wandered to her forehead. His remarks puzzled her, and she began to wonder if he were still wandering in his mind.

She gently shook her head. "No, dear one, I do not think it would be for the best. After so many months——"

"Months!" He raised himself up slightly, but the effort was too much for him, and he sank back upon the pillow. "Months? But you told me a week!"

Bobbie's lip trembled. Her fears were justified. Not yet had he entirely recovered. It was the doctor who pointed out the truth, as he drew her to one side. "Don't you realize, Mrs. Verrell, he is talking about the railway accident. For the moment his memory has leaped back to the time he was first injured. Presently he may remember what has happened in the meantime."

The doctor's words were prophetic, even as he spoke Verrell became conscious that the curious dream which had seemed to fill his mind since the time of the accident was more indelible than he had thought. The events seemed rather real, almost as though they had actually happened.

What of the dim echo of murder which seemed to ring through his ears; what of Hepplewhaite, and a man named Sniffy Tompkins—— It was the thought of Sniffy Tompkins which released the flood-gates of his memory, but now there were no blank spaces, no dark chapters in it. He watched the doctor leave, then

when Bobbie approached the bedside again, he seized her hand in a passionate grasp.

"Bobbie, Bobbie, my Lady of the Phone, my wonderful, wonderful wife. Once again you saved me when my soul was turning blacker than the night. It was your voice, your faith in me which kept my head above the swirling waters which might have engulfed me," and he told her of his emotions in the public-house.

She listened, her eyes shining with pride and love, but when he would have continued she restrained him.

"No, no, Blackshirt dear. Another day when you are stronger," and because he realized that he was feeling weak, he placidly closed his lips.

On the next day Bobbie brought in with her two visitors: Roberts and Marshall.

Roberts approached respectfully, a few words and a steady handshake was his only method of conveying sympathy, but his eyes more than made up for his brevity.

With Marshall it was different. The face of the old detective beamed with affection and happiness, and he seized Verrell's hand in a wringing grasp.

"Well, my boy, you have come back amongst us again, and you are no gladder than we. Lord, but I am pleased! You have given us a few frights, I can tell you."

Verrell turned his face away, and his lips drooped bitterly. "You have put that nicely, Marshall," he said slowly, "but since yesterday I have been thinking. I—I believe I shall never forgive myself. Oh, heavens! What a cad I have been to you all!"

"Hush, hush! My dear chap, don't you understand that any doctor can give you an explanation and an excuse for your actions? Mrs. Verrell's doctor—a fine fellow, and one to whom we were bound to tell your

secret—more or less—has told us all about it; if I could remember the long names he used I might be able to pass all he said on to you. The main point is that your memory went phut. You cannot be blamed for that, now, can you?"

"Perhaps not!" he replied, "and yet—Bobbie's husband a crook, a cheap, bombastic criminal. It seems rather horrible."

At this point Bobbie interrupted. "My darling, please!" There was a break in her voice. "Do you believe we did not realize after a time what had happened? Of course we did, and yet we had faith to know that we should win you back again."

"And when we met in Mrs. ffoulkes-Herriot's garden I thrust you aside. I was mad—mad. When I think of what you felt then——"

"But you mustn't, please, please, dear husband of mine. Perhaps it was—terrible, but you did not break my faith, did he, Marshall?" The detective shook his head. "There, you see, Richard. Beside, Roberts will tell you the same, too, won't you, Roberts?" The valet, in his turn, nodded. "There you are, you see," she continued gaily. "All of us knew that sooner or later we would win you back again to ourselves, and that is why, having failed as your wife, I tried as your Lady of the Phone."

"And to think I hated you!"

She gazed at him, suddenly surprised. "You hated me?"

"Yes, God knows I did, right up to the moment you told me of your faith in my innocence. Then, for the first time, I changed."

Twin tears trickled down her cheeks. "Let us forget the past and remember the future. You know, we have still our honeymoon to celebrate," and a delicious colour flushed her cheeks.

There was a slight pause, broken at length by Verrell.

"Your father," he said with a puzzled frown; "does he know everything?"

Bobbie shook her head decidedly. "Poor daddie! No, he doesn't know a thing other than we have found you. A few days before your injury Sir Austin went across to the States to give a series of lectures on criminology, and I pushed daddie off too."

Verrell smiled. "Wise little Lady of the Phone! But now I have lots of questions to ask. How did you know I was at Jane Harrigan's, and what happened at No. 16, River Lane?"

"Unseen by you, Mr. Marshall and Roberts have been guarding you day and night," she informed him. "Ever since you went back into that dreadful East End I have known where you have been all the time, and when Marshall heard indirectly from an old friend of his that you were suspected, I sent you a warning note.

"As for No. 16, Roberts was behind you when you sent the telegram to Hepplewhaite, and that night the three of us were near. We saw you cross the road, and while Roberts looked after the car Marshall followed you to the door. Then there were the horrible explosions. Before we had time to act the house lit up, there were shouts, movement, and we knew it was too late to rescue you."

Then with a tearful voice she told him the remainder of the story—of Roberts's fantastic scheme, of how he had stolen a motor-lorry, and, waiting for the ambulance, caused the collision; of the hold-up and subsequent rescue. At the finish she turned her face away to hide her twitching lips, and he caught hold of her hand and held it firmly.

"My dear! My dear! You must have suffered." He paused, then asked: "What occurred in that house? What happened to Sniffy Tompkins?" Then all at once the mention of that night, dim and obscure until then, became more vivid, and he remembered the red

stain on Sniffy's nightshirt—spreading—accusing——
"Oh, my God! Bobbie!" Her voice rose, then broke with the poignant anguish of his mental pain. "Bobbie! Bobbie! Tell me—Sniffy—I killed him——" His eager eyes searched her face for denial.

Bobbie bit her lip, then placed her cool hand on his forehead. "Hush, dear one! You will make yourself ill again."

"But Sniffy——"

She turned her face away. "—is dead!" she replied in a voice so low that he scarcely heard her; but when he would have spoken she quickly raised her hand. "It was not your fault; the doctors proved it. Sniffy's wife acknowledged it with her last dying words. Sniffy fired at you, and the shock of the bullet striking you caused you unconsciously to clutch the trigger."

Poor Bobbie! The half-lie seemed to burn her lips in the telling, for, indeed, the doctors had not proved the fact. What had really happened was that Hepplewhaite had hinted at the possibility, and two or three doctors had acknowledged the feasibility of it. As she saw the agonized lines fade from his face, however, she forgave herself.

"And does the world know now that Blackshirt is not a murderer?"

Here Bobbie was on smooth ground. Her face lit up with enthusiasm. "Hepplewhaite did his work nobly, Richard darling. Much of what he told must have been the truth, for he published extracts of a letter you sent him, told his readers how, despite the weight of public opinion, he believed in you, then he wrote of the telegram, of the shots, and his finding of Sniffy Tompkins. He made a fine story of it. I—I almost cried when I read it."

"But by now he must know who I am."

"He does, dear!"

He made a gesture of despair, and his face paled. "Then it is only a matter of time before——" he said dully.

She shook her head gaily. "Hepplewhaite is a dear," she said, "and the father of the jolliest, plumpest little boy I have ever seen, and you are to be his godfather."

Verrell stared at her with amazement. "But who worked this new miracle?" And while he asked the question his eyes gazed at her thoughtfully.

Realizing the significance of his look, she shook her head. "It was you, not I." But her eyes dropped, and once again her cheeks flushed.

Verrell smiled. "He's only a man, and what man could resist those wonderful, pleading eyes of yours?" he said. "But now——" He hesitated, and his face worked uneasily. "During the night I woke up. There was a promise I had made and forgotten——"

"Nellie Jones?" she asked, dimpling.

His eyes opened slightly with bewilderment. "How did you know?"

"For some time you were delirious."

"And I told you all about her? Were you jealous?" he asked.

She laughed softly. "If you knew what you called her! If you ever say things like that about me——"

He was too worried, however, to smile. "But, Bobbie, I promised to—to marry her."

She kissed his fingers and placed them on his lips. "Listen before you speak another word." She turned round to look for something, then noticed that Marshall and Roberts had disappeared. Her eyes gleamed softly with amusement. Later she would thank them, but meanwhile——

She saw the paper she wanted. "Listen to this," she commanded when she was back again by his side. "An extract from the *Wandsworth Weekly Journal.*

'An engagement is announced between Miss Nellie Jones, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Jones, of 1, Cheyne Gardens, Wandsworth, and Mr. John Williams, of 27, Whittaker Road, who has been for many years in the employment of Messrs. Knowles and Woodstock, retail tobacconists,' etc., etc., and then: 'The marriage, we understand, is to take place very shortly.'"

When she had finished reading he looked directly at her, and the corners of his lips twitched. "Now who is guilty, you or I?"

Her face was a little sad when she replied: "I spoke to her as one woman to another, and—she really loved you, as she understood love."

"Poor girl, I am sorry for her."

Bobbie shook her head. "You needn't be, Richard dear. She will soon forget, and I am sure he will make her happy. But now you have talked enough. You must sleep."

She smoothed the bedclothes and patted the pillow, while he lay still, gazing into her face with longing, adoring eyes. Gently she moved away at last. Her hand was on the handle when she heard his voice.

"Bobbie!" he called.

"Go to sleep," she murmured.

"I will," he promised. "But please come here," he pleaded.

She went over to him, and, bending down, placed her lips upon his. The seconds ticked by; neither moved. Incredible as it seemed, this was their first real kiss since the few words had been spoken which had made them man and wife, so their lips clung to each other, and the flame of love burned brightly. He smiled up at her and then closed his eyes.

He was happy!

THE END